

RELIGIOUS TENSION AND TOLERANCE IN MALAYSIA: A SURVEY OF NEWSPAPER REPORTS ON RELIGIOUS TENSION INCIDENTS FROM 1997-2003

Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri*

Introduction

Malaysia being a multi racial and multi religious society has the unique honour of being the home of many religions and races of people. However, its constitution states that Islam is the 'religion of the Federation',¹ being the religion of the Malay people whose form the majority of the people inhabiting the geographical area called Malaysia. Based on this multi-dimensional nature of Malaysia and its constitution recognition of a particular religion as the official religion in the midst of many others, even though these other religions are practiced by the minority in the country,² one would expect that there should be, and

* The author is an Assistant Professor at the Department of *Usul al-Din* and Comparative Religion and currently Head of Department of General Studies, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. The writer would like to acknowledge the Research Centre, International Islamic University of Malaysia for funding this research. My acknowledgement also goes to my research assistant, Bro. Musa Yusuf Owoyemi. This is a revised article based on the paper presented at the 4th Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR), Santander, Spain on 8th-11th September 2004.

1. The Federal constitution states in the article (3), clause (1) "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation", see Federal Constitution (as at 25th July 2000), Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services, 2000
2. The Federal Constitution also acknowledges freedom of religion. The article (11), clause (1) states the following: "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to clause (4), to propagate it." Clause (3) of the same article states that "Every religious group has the right - (a) to manage its own religious affairs; (b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes; and (c) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law, see Federal Constitution (as at 25th July 2000), article (11) clause (1) and (3)

certainly would be a religious tension in the country as in other countries of the same nature like Malaysia. Moreover, since there was a crisis of this nature on the 13th of May 1969, in which there was a racial cum religious riot, which resulted in the death of a number of people, it is worthwhile to look into what is happening now and to now if this kind of tension still exist or not. Thus based on this assumption and on the fact that a thing of this nature has happened before in this nation, this article makes a survey of major newspaper reports on religious crisis in the country between the periods of 1997 to 2003 in order to ascertain whether religious tension still continue to exist in the country or not. And if it does not exist anymore, what are the modalities or factors responsible for its non-existence?

The methodology that would be employed is both empirical and analytical in nature. The empirical method would be employed in the gathering of data from the major newspaper reports in Malaysia during the period under study and likewise in other foreign media reports which carried some news related to the issue under discussion, while the analytical methodology would be employed in the analysis of these data gathered from the newspapers.

Background

Malaysia is a geographical area in Southeast Asia on the South China Sea. It 'is divided into two regions, known as West Malaysia and East Malaysia. West Malaysia, also known as Peninsular Malaysia, consists of the southern portion of the Malay Peninsula and nearby islands. Thailand borders West Malaysia on the north, and Singapore lies off the southern coastal tip. East Malaysia occupies the northern section of Borneo Island, as well as offshore islands. East Malaysia shares Borneo with Brunei, which lies on a small section of the northern coast, and with the Kalimantan region of Indonesia, which lies to the south. Malaysia is a federation of 13 states (Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Pinang, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, and Terengganu) and three federal territories (Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan). Kuala Lumpur, coextensive with the federal territory, is the capital and largest city.'³

3. Encarta Encyclopedia, Microsoft Corporation, USA, 2004, s.v. "Malaysia"

The mode of governance is constitutional monarchy, where 'the head of state is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Supreme Head of the Federation), who is selected by and from nine hereditary sultans, or rulers, and serves a five-year term. Executive power is exercised by the prime minister, who is the leader of the majority party or coalition in the House of Representatives and is appointed by the head of state.'⁴

The total population of Malaysia, according to the 2000 Census, was 23.27 million compared to 18.38 million in 1991. Of the total population of Malaysia in the 2000 Census, about 21.890 million or 94.1% were Malaysian citizens. Of the total Malaysian citizens, Bumiputra comprised 65.1%, Chinese 26.0% and Indians 7.7%, the ethnic composition being 60.6%, 28.1% and 7.9% respectively in 1991. Non-Malaysian citizens totaled 1.385 million (or 5.9%) in Census 2000 as against 805 thousand (or 4.4%) in 1991. In Sarawak, the predominant ethnic group in Census 2000 was the Ibans which accounted for 30.1% of the state's total Malaysian citizens followed by the Chinese (26.7%) and Malays (23.0%). Similar data for Sabah showed the predominant ethnic group being the Kadazan Dusun (18.4%) followed by Bajau (17.3%) and Malays (15.3%).⁵

Religion wise, as it has been said above, 'Islam is the country's official religion, although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion. More than half the people of Malaysia are Muslims, including nearly all ethnic Malays. Most Chinese are Buddhists, although Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism) are also important. Most Indians practice Hinduism. In Sabah and Sarawak many of the indigenous peoples are Christians, although traditional beliefs are also widely practiced.

The religious population distribution of Malaysia, in the same census of 2000, shows 'that religion is highly correlated with ethnicity. Islam was the most widely professed religion in Malaysia; its proportion

4. Encarta Encyclopedia, s.v. "Malaysia". For further detail see www.statistics.gov.my.

5. Press Statement, Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report: Population and Housing Census 2000, Department of Statistics Malaysia, 28/06/2004, www.statistics.gov.my

increasing from 58.6% in 1991 to 60.4% in 2000. Malaysia, being a multi-religious nation, also has a fair share of those embracing other religions such as Buddhism (19.2%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.3%) and Confucianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religion (2.6%).⁶

Thus, in essence, Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, as well as the religion of the majority of the people of Malaysia, while other religions belong to the minority Chinese and Indians in the peninsula and also the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, who are Christians and Traditionalists.

Literature Review

Among the most instructive books, which have discussed the issue of religious tolerance and tension in Malaysia, is the book entitled "*Islam and Tolerance*" edited by Syed Othman Alhabshi and Nik Mustapha Nik Hassan.⁷ The book looked at the whole spectrum of tolerance in Islam with specific focus on Malaysia. It looked at the issue of tolerance in the socio-political scene of the country in relation to ethnicity and religion. It discussed the factors responsible for the accommodation and continuous existence of the non-Muslims in Malaysia with the predominantly Malay Muslims in harmony. Though it pointed out the fact that religious and ethnic tensions exist in the midst of this tolerant atmosphere, it has not gotten so serious as to cause any damage to the continuous existence of the country as one, as it has happened in other nations of the same nature as Malaysia. It concluded its discussion by positing that a lot can still be achieved if the universal principles of tolerance is properly implemented by those in authority in the country, as this will keep the peace and harmonious co-operation in the country by strengthening what has already been achieved so far.

Another book, which gives an insight into the multi-religious nature of Malaysia, is the book entitled "*Sacred Tensions*" by Raymond L. M. Lee

7. Syed Othman Alhabshi and Nik Mustapha Nik Hassan, (ed.) *Islam and Tolerance*, Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 1996.

and Susan E. Ackerman.⁸ In this book, they looked at the multi-religious nature of the country, how it is being rationalized by the middle class in order to promote charismatic forms of religion. The book concentrates on four religions, namely Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. It looks at the relations of these religions in their traditional context and how they co-exist with modernity which is rapidly changing the society in which they are.

In a more general book entitled "*Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*" by Yohanan Friedman,⁹ he reviews the hadith literature on a series of topics concerning pre-modern Muslim attitudes toward non-Muslims, including equality before the law, religious compulsion, apostasy, and interfaith marriages. He shows that whereas Muslims early on granted non-Muslims equal protection from murder, with time, only one of the four Sunni *madhhabs* held to this position. More broadly, he argues that this development over time signifies that "the idea of Islamic exaltedness gained the upper hand as the decisive factor in the determination of the law." He observed that Muslims throughout the pre-modern period "faced the other religions from the position of a ruling power, and enjoyed in relation to them a position of unmistakable superiority." To a great extent, he said, it defined their attitudes toward tolerance and coercion.

Reading most books that have spoken about religious tension and tolerance in Malaysia, they are yet no a thorough work on the newspapers and the reports they carried concerning this issue.¹⁰ This is important

-
8. Raymond L. M. Lee & Susan E. Ackerman, *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia*, Columbia, University of South Carolina, 1997.
 9. Yohanan Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
 10. See for example Ahmad Yousif, *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: An Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience*, Kuala Lumpur: Thinker's Library, 1998; Mohammad Abu Bakar, *Islam, Civil Society, and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia*, in Nakamura Mitsuo, *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001; Syed Serajul Islam, *The Politics of Islamic Identity in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Thomson, 2005

since they are more nearer to the scene of the incidents and being the mouthpiece through which people are first inform of any happenings or events in the society. It is this area that this research therefore, seeks to explore by looking at the newspapers' reports and some other news which are directly related to this issue between the periods of 1997 to 2003, in order to know the nature of religious tension and tolerance in Malaysia during this period.

Findings

A survey of the major newspapers in Malaysia from 1997 to 2003 on the issue of religious crisis, tolerance and intolerance reveals that there were few but serious religious crisis in the country during the period in question, especially from the year 2000 up ward. The most prominent among these crises during the years under study were as follows:

- (1) The case of Kampung Rawa in Penang between the Muslims and the Hindus in 1998, as they both clashed over the disturbance of each other during the time of worship;¹¹
- (2) The Maunah case, July 2000, in which a set of Muslim extremists stole some arms and ammunitions from two military camps and call for the over throw of the government;¹²
- (3) The case of the clash between the Malays and Indians in Kampung Medan in March 2001 which was seen as, predominantly, an ethnic issue, but with religious connotations since the Malays are Muslims while the Indians are predominantly Hindus; and
- (4) The cases of the burnt churches and Christian centres in same year, October 2001, after the declaration of war on

11. See Mansor Mohd Noor, "New Dimensions of Social Conflicts in Malaysia: Learning from Ethnic Conflict in Kampung Rawa, Penang", <http://seacsn.cspu-ugm.or.id/papers/regionalws1/mansor.html>

12. On the Al-Maunah saga see, Zabidi Mohamed, *Rahsia dalam Rahsia Maunah: Kebenaran yang Sebenar*, Kuala Lumpur: Zabidi Publication, 2003

Afghanistan by the United States government and its allies, in Sungai Patani, Kedah, Subang Jaya and Segamat, Johore respectively.

However, during the period in question, a total of 34 articles and reports were found to be relevant to this topic of discussion. And one peculiar thing which under lay the fact that there was religious tension during this period is the fact that most of the articles and newspaper reports were those given by government officials trying to calm the people's nerves and each time reminding them of the importance of religious tolerance and of the importance of keeping the peace and harmony that exist in the country. Just as the debate over the activities and agendas of the Islamic party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia, (Pan Malaysia Islamic Party, PAS),¹³ and its effect on the non-Muslims also dominated a lot of these reports.

Likewise, it will be noticed that the number of these articles increased immediately after the September 11, 2001 incident in the United States of America. Previously, there were about four to five articles on the same issue between 1997 and 2000. But it increases to seven in 2001 and a further increment was noticed in 2002, as nine articles were found in the major newspapers on this issue.

A survey of the international media through the internet – specifically the BBC website, www.bbcnews.com, a religious website, www.apologeticsindex.org, and a human right website, human right without frontiers, www.hrwf.net – reveals thirty-three (33) news articles on this issue with specific reference to events and happenings in Malaysia. In all, sixty-seven (67) news articles were found to be relevant to this discourse. The breakdown of the whole report is as follows:

13. For detail on Pan Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) see, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_Party_of_Malaysia; <http://www.parti-pas.org>; also recent study, from Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)*, Kuala Lumpur: MSRI, 2004

YEAR	www.emedia.com.my	www.bbcnews.com	www.apologeticsindex.org	www.hrwf.net
1997	5	-	-	-
1998	4	1	-	-
1999	3	1	-	-
2000	4	4	5	-
2001	7	5	-	10
2002	9	3	-	-
2003	9	4	-	-
TOTAL	34	18	5	10

Table 1: Breakdown of Newspapers' Reports

A Look at Some of the Newspapers' Reports

As it has been said above that, the bulk of the statements on the issue of religion were made by the government or government officials, in order to calm the people's nerves and each time reminding them of the importance of religious tolerance and of the importance of keeping the peace and harmony that exist in the country. And likewise, the debate over the activities and agendas of the Islamic party, PAS, and its effect on the non-Muslims also forms a major point of contention on the issue of religion in Malaysia at this period of time. Thus, it will be worth while to look into some of the contents of these reports, the occasion at which such statements were made, the reason which calls for it and who made it.

In this connection, it will be better to follow the chronological order of the years under study by taking all the articles in a particular year and analyzing its contents and going in such a manner to the very last year. In the light of this, the first article will be that of the year 1997.

Speaking at the King Faisal International Prize Award for Service to Islam in Saudi Arabia on the 23rd of March 1997, where he was conferred with this award, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, speaking to an international audience and being conferred this title for his service to Islam and as a 'widely respected statesman whose policies fostered rapport and co-operation between Muslims and

non-Muslims in Malaysia', was reported to have 'touched on the need for good government which in the case of Malaysia includes being fair to non-Muslims.'

According to this report, Tun Dr. Mahathir hampered on the need to be fair to non-Muslim minority in a majority Muslim country. And, in apparent reference to the opposition party, he said that the tolerance of the Malaysian government to non-Muslim minority is what Islam as a religion preaches although 'many Muslims would like to think this as being secular.' In other word, while to the government, what is being practiced in Malaysia is an Islamic system and it believes that Malaysia is a fully Islamic state; the opposition believes this to be contrary and thinks it to be a secular state. And referring also to the policy of the government, he said 'we believe that being just to the non-Muslims who are not against us simply reflects the true teachings of Islam.' And this policy he said is based on the belief that since Muslims 'do not like Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries to be oppressed, we must not oppress non-Muslim minorities in our midst.'¹⁴ That is, it is this view that informs the attitude of the Malaysian government to the non-Muslim minorities in the country and it is this belief that informs its moderate approach to the other religions in the society, and it is on this ground that it opposes the Islamic party, PAS.

Likewise talking about why any mode of violence is eschewed and not allowed in Malaysia, he said, to the Malaysian government, 'rejection of the Muslim brotherhood, violent feuds, killing of other Muslims in the name of Islam and Allah when in fact the objective is political...to us, all these cannot be Islamic.' This may look like Islam, but it is not and cannot be allowed in a society like Malaysia. And understanding the fact that others may disagree, like the opposition, he said, 'many Muslims would like to disagree, arguing that this was being secular but we will not argue with them because debating with or opposing them will not convince them that we are right. But we believe and we are equally convinced in our beliefs that what we do is in the service and in accord with Islam.'

14. New Sunday Times, 23/03/1997

On the 5th of April 1997, while opening a factory at Kota Bharu in Kelantan, KUB Tekstil Sdn Bhd, the Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir, because of the presence of some of the opposition party members, PAS, used the occasion to talk about the need to live in peace with other people of other races and of different religion. He said that 'Muslims must show the Jews, who control the international media, that we are normal human beings who live in peace' and 'our relations with the other races, who are of different religions, are cordial.' Likewise, it was reported that, 'referring to the UMNO¹⁵-PAS rivalry, Tun Dr. Mahathir said 'Muslims [in Malaysia] were grateful that their political differences did not lead to violence or even killings unlike in certain countries.' And he also used the occasion to highlight that political differences should not lead to division among the Muslims themselves and should not lead to religious extremism as this he said will cause suffering to the people. 'We can differ politically but Muslims cannot afford to be divided. We also cannot afford to be extremists because the people will suffer.'¹⁶

On the need for Muslims to reform their mode of thought, and to practice tolerance and brotherhood in the face of disagreement among the Muslims, Tun Dr. Mahathir said, tracing the cause of misguided thoughts in the mind of the Muslims, at a regional conference themed "Towards the 21st Century: Reformation and Challenges for Muslims in the Region" on the 23rd of August 1997 which was organized by the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 'After 1,400 years of Islamic history, Muslims had been exposed to a variety of teachings ranging from narrow interpretations which reject the present world outright to one that alienates Islam and accepting secularism.' And on the need for Muslims to eschew violence among themselves, he said 'while deviationists must return to the true path, it must be done through musyawarah (consensus) and not through pressure, oppression and injustice'. "If an agreement cannot be reached, tolerance and brotherhood must be practiced," he said. "Attempts through the use of force that causes

15. Wikipedia contributors, "United Malays National Organisation", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UMNO>; also see <http://www.umno-online.com>

16. New Straits Times, 05/04/1997

disunity and never-ending riots must be avoided.”¹⁷ In other words, it is not on the part of anyone to force others to accept their form of religious beliefs, and this difference should not lead to disunity and violence – the primary concern should be dialogue and tolerance in solving the differences.

Finally, passing a motion on religion in the UMNO general assembly and carried in the newspaper on the 7th of September 1997, it was resolved that part of the policies of any government formed by the party on the issue of religion will be:

- ❑ To emphasise its commitment in the struggle to uphold, protect and spread the teachings of Islam and to review these policies so that it becomes more transparent and detail and be made the main agenda in UMNO’s struggle.
- ❑ To defend the moderate approach without leading to religious extremism or deviating from the religion in the implementation of policies on Islam which is moderate and in line with the understanding and struggle on Islam in the country.¹⁸

These two important points forms the core of the policy of the government and it informs its approach to other religions. That is the toleration of their existence in the society and the protection of the rights of their adherents.

Turning to the year 1998, it could be called a year of tolerance and moderation, as most of the reports hampered on the need for tolerance and moderation among the different religions in the nation. On the report carried in the newspapers’ on the 7th of April 1998, shortly after the economic crisis, the King Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja’afar and Tun Dr. Mahathir both talked about the need for Muslims to make sacrifice in

17. *Ibid.*, 23/08/1997

18. *New Sunday Times*, 07/09/1997

the face of the threat to the economy of the nation and the Prime Minister also spoke about the need for the Muslims in Malaysia to be tolerant to other religions so as to 'safeguard' the nation by maintaining the peace that exist in the nation. He said: "We have played a role in safeguarding the dignity of Islam. Therefore, do not tarnish our image and the religion just because we form the majority and feel protected in our country." And citing the examples of Muslim nations "who had lost their life and properties defending the religion and their countries from the enemies of Islam", he was reported to have said that 'he was thankful that Muslims in Malaysia are still able to celebrate Aidil Adha despite the country's economic problems' because "we have seen the calamities that have befallen the Muslims in Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya. Similar fate has also befallen the Albanian Muslims in Kosovo, Serbia."¹⁹ Thus, it is important that the peace in the nation should be maintained so that its fate will not become like that of the nations mentioned.

Delivering a speech entitled "Toleration and Moderation in Islam" on the 10th of May 1998, when he was conferred with a Honorary Doctor of Literature at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, 'in recognition of his contributions to the development of Islam,' the former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir, was reported to have said that 'Muslims should not seek revenge on their enemies or fight among themselves if they want to paint a correct picture of the religion'. He was quoted as saying: "Killing each other and killing others in order to emphasise the depth and strength of our commitment to our struggle may succeed in drawing attention to our grievances, but they will not lead to the success of our struggle." He said 'tolerance and moderation had paid off handsomely for Muslims in Malaysia. It had brought about stability and peace and enabled the country to progress.'²⁰

On the 18th of July 1998, the foreign minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi admonished that 'Malaysians of all religions must ensure that religious extremism does not take root in the country.' He said

19. Business Times, 07/04/1998

20. New Sunday Times, 10/05/1998

"Malaysians of different faiths have always practiced moderation and this must be continued. Fights should not arise because of religion." And talking about Islam in Malaysia, he said: "In Malaysia, we practice Islam which is moderate. Extremism can lead to violence and riots. We read in the newspapers and see on television, news about Muslims fighting amongst themselves or with their governments." On the need for religion not to be a cause of disunity in the country, and for all Malaysians to accept the reality of the nation, he said: "Malaysia is multi-racial and multi-religious. This must be accepted by all. Just as Muslims are sensitive about our religion and race, non-Muslims too are sensitive about their religion and race. ...We must interact on a platform of understanding and tolerance."²¹

However, there was an ugly incident this year also, March 1998, as there was a clash in Kampung Rawa in Penang between the Muslims and the Hindus over the issue of disturbance of each other during the time of worship. Both parties were caught throwing stone at each other, but it was effectively contained before it gets out of hands.

The year 1999, being an election year and at a time when people were disenchanted with the ruling party on the way the former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, was treated and bundled out of government, most of the issues bother on the out-come of the election and the surprise take over of Terengganu and continuous control of Kelantan by the Islamic Party, PAS, in addition to winning 27 seats in the parliament – a thing which was never thought of in the past.

Writing in an article titled "Is an Islamic State Possible?" Zainah Anwar looked at the reasons why the radical party was voted for massively by the people and came to the conclusion that it was not because the people love the kind of Islam being propagated by the party, and neither does it signify that the nation is moving towards a radical Islamic state, as propagated by the party. She said, 'The election results should not be regarded as a vote for an Islamic State or a vote against

21. New Straits Times, 18/07/1998

development so that the clock can be turned back and all of Malaysia can be like Kelantan.' This is so because 'PAS' vision of an obscurantist Islam is unlikely to deliver the demand for prosperity and stability nor meet the demands of industrialisation and modernisation in a multi-racial and multi-religious society. Neither can PAS deliver on the public yearning for more social freedoms, in general and the women's demand for equality and justice, in particular.' But, she said, their massive vote for the party was a protest vote to show their discontentment towards the action of the ruling party against Anwar who 'was perceived by many as the charismatic leader of the Islamic revival movement in Malaysia.' Thus, this is not a call for a radical Islamic State, as this is not likely to be feasible in a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Malaysia.²²

The year 2000, was a different ball game all together, as the religious tension and extremism that the government have been campaigning against and manage to keep under control came to the fore with the sudden invasion of two military camps, on the 1st of July 2000, by the Maunah Islamic group, headed by a former army private Mohamed Amin Razali, to steal arms and ammunition for their planned take over of the government of the nation. According to reports, 'Al-Maunah, which the authorities characterized as a deviant sect, saw its goal as fighting on behalf of suppressed Muslims, and its leaders mixed superstition, religion and martial arts mumbo-jumbo to convince their followers they would be invincible in battle.' The group, which was reported to have a web site of its own, also has a message on the site which reads, "'Jihad is our way! Islam will be victorious!'" "God is great! God is great! God is great!" "Are you willing to see Muslims being trampled on and oppressed?" "If not, what are you willing to do to prevent it?"

Although the group had existed long before their invasion of a military camp, their activities was largely restricted to attacking other religions' temple, a report says 'But for all the slickness of the two arms heists, the group's previous actions amounted to taking a few potshots at a Hindu temple at Batu Caves, breweries on the outskirts of Kuala

22. Ibid., 22/12/1999

Lumpur, and a power company's electric tower.' Reacting on this issue, the Minister of Defense said: "No religion says you should kill or kidnap," Dato Seri Najib said. "This is the face of Islam we don't want to portray." Also the official Bernama news agency on Saturday quoted Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urging followers of deviationist teachings to stop their activities. "We do not want them to continue to be misled and probably get involved in violent and extreme activities," he said in the royal capital of Kuala Kangsar in Perak. He further adds that "the government is waiting for a full report on the activities of such groups."

With this event, the government went tough and clamped down on all Islamic groups who are viewed as extremist in their teaching. The New Straits Times reported the Islamic Development Department as saying Al-Maunah, which pulled off the heist to cause one of Malaysia's most serious security threats in years, was among 44 groups in the country whose Muslim teachings deviated. "Of the total, 17 deviationist groups claimed to possess mystical powers and invincibility by reciting Koranic verses for specific purposes as well as to enhance the status of their spiritual leaders."

The Maunah event of year 2000 spilt over into the following year 2001, and it continued till it culminated in the sentence to death of its leader and two other members of the group. And also the clamp down on other group culminated in the arrest of some of the members of KMM, Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, whose leader was said to be the son of PAS spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat – that is Nik Adli Nik Aziz – and whom reports say were involved in a spate of crimes which includes the bombing of a church and a temple.

Reacting to the activities of the extremists, the former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was reported to have said: 'The government would clamp down on those opposing the "true teachings of Islam", because these groups which 'deliberately influenced students to focus only on religious education and to be politically active at the expense of other knowledge were actually "betraying the Islamic teachings." These 'Militants were "traitors" prepared to rob, kill, threaten

places of worship of other religions and topple the government through violence and would not be treated lightly. Furthermore, he said: "These are the people who create chaos, resulting in government not being able to concentrate on development because it is spending time and money on curbing such activities." And linking the issue with the Islamic radical trend, he said: "They want us to be like Afghanistan and if we do not do it, we are not Islamic enough and they reject Malaysia as an Islamic nation.

Apart from the issue of the Islamic extremist groups, there were also some other religious tensions and crises during this year, 2001. In the month of March, an ethnic-religious crisis broke out between the Malays and the Indians at Kampung Medan, Petaling Jaya. Six people were reported to have lost their lives in the mayhem. Though it was said to be an ethnic clash, but since the Malays are Muslims and the Indians predominantly Hindus, a religious connotation was also attached to the clash. Likewise, the Marthoma Christian Community Centre, in Sungai Petani, was set ablaze by suspected Muslim extremists in July 2001.

And after the 11th September attack in U.S, and immediately the U.S and its allies decided to invade Afghanistan, this was taken to be a Christian's assault on Islam and Muslims, and it led to the burning of churches in some parts of the country. According to reports, 'Molotov cocktails were thrown at St. Philip's Catholic Centre on October 14 in Segamat in the southern state of Johore. Likewise, Catholic Church of Christ the King in Sungai Petani, Kedah was also attacked by the arsonists protesting the invasion of Afghanistan. While Christ Community Centre Church in Subang Jaya was torched by the Muslim extremists on October 27, 2001.

The political front also presented some interesting scene, as the ruling Islamic party in Kelantan, PAS, banned the sale of alcohol in the Tanah Merah District Council of the state by revoking the licenses of the non-Muslims selling the product. This drew a sharp reaction from the other parties which formed a coalition with PAS, as this was seen as a renege on the promise made by PAS not to ban the sale of alcohol but to prevent it from being sold to Muslims. This was seen as a betrayal and a trample on

the rights of other non-Muslim Malaysians, whose religion allows them the right to take alcohol.²³

The year 2002 was replete with talk of no tolerance to the terrorists who are now under fire after the September 11 attack on the United States. The scene seems to shift from the domestic sphere to the international sphere. In April 2002, Malaysia hosted the 54 members of the Organisation of Islamic Countries on a ministerial level to discuss the issue, and terrorism in all ramifications was condemned. But with a cautious tone that the views of Muslims must also be listened to, and the tag of terror should not be labeled on all Muslims and neither should they be discriminated against anywhere in the world.

On a report carried on the 16th of April, Tun Dr. Mahathir, while assuring the U.S of his government support in fighting terrorist warned that "no race or religion should be condemned or discriminated against simply because people of the same race of their co-religionists have been involved in terrorist activities."²⁴ Likewise talking about the Islam being advocated in Malaysia by the government, the Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said while addressing an audience at a think-tank Heritage Foundation dinner at the Metropolitan Club, "We set ourselves apart from those who hold a dogmatic and literalist view of Islam; those who hark back 1,400 years for their so-called ideal of an Islamic State". And in apparent reference to the opposition Islamic party, PAS, he was reported to have said that, 'Malaysia was now threatened by religious extremists who want to replace the moderate Islamic governance with a skewed interpretation of a theocratic state.' And while noting the move made so far on the issue of terrorism, he said: "We have acted swiftly and decisively to thwart the proliferation of terrorist cells and networks. At the international level, we are in full support of all United Nations actions to address this global problem."²⁵ Also while calling on

23. Business Times, 14/08/200

24. New Straits Times, 16/04/2002

25. Ibid., 18/09/2002

the component parties of the Barisan Nasional coalition to be united in fighting racial and religious extremists, the former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir, said: "These extremist groups pose a great threat to society and if they are not opposed and stopped, they might incite racial and religious riots when they cannot get what they want. These factions are near-sighted and narrow-minded. Hence, I call on all BN component parties to act more courageously and be united as one in fighting for the BN objectives of promoting a united, peaceful, safe, progressive and prosperous Malaysian society."²⁶

Moving to the last year under study, 2003, it was relatively low key on religious issues and tensions, as the focus was on the NAM, The Non-Align Movement, and The Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), meetings that the country was planning to hold. Likewise, the issue of the retirement and handover of the former prime minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir, to his deputy, Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also dominated the scene at home.

However, at the OIC conference, while delivering his speech on the 16th of October 2003 at Putrajaya Convention Centre, Putrajaya, Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir, made a remark about the Jews and the fact that they are the ones causing a lot of problem in the world. He said while the Jews are sitting down in their homes, they send and trick others to fight and die in their defense. He said "We are actually very strong. 1.3 billion people cannot be simply wiped out. The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them."²⁷

This issue generated a lot of furor and reaction in the international scene. But at a press briefing later on the 17th of October, Tun Dr. Mahathir insisted that what he had said is true, and that no matter what or how it is perceived by others, he stands by his words since they are based on facts.²⁸

26. New Sunday Times, 06/10/2002

27. New Straits Times, 18/10/2003

28. Ibid, 18/10/2003

One issue that also caught the attention of the other religions at home in the country was that of the consideration, by the government, of making pre-nuptial course for all non-Muslims before their wedding a compulsion, as it is done for the Muslims. This was announced by Women and Family Development Parliamentary Secretary, Datuk Mastika Junaidah Husin. And the reason for this was because, 'the number of divorce among non-Muslims has increased from 1,613 cases in 2000 to 3,793, while that for Muslims, it dropped from 13,536 in 2000 to 11,004.' And according to her, 'the government believes the fall in the Muslim divorce rate is because Muslim couples are required to attend pre-nuptial courses.' While some intellectuals and religionists disagree with this assertion because it is not based on facts, the problem of who should plan and organize the course also aroused. Many however want the government to allow each religious group to organize this course for their adherents since the teachings and beliefs of each religion on marriage defer. Reverend Jestus Pereira, chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, said: "If the Government takes over this responsibility, then there is the danger of imposing particular perspectives on all, and this may be in variation or even in conflict with the teachings of another religion."²⁹

On the international scene, a report was released by the United States government, on December 2003, which criticized and included Malaysia among the nine countries which discriminate against other religions and religious sects of the official religion, which is not supported by the government. The new Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reacted to this report and strongly denied that such a thing existed in Malaysia. He asked Washington 'to send its observers to see how the Muslim led government marking the festivals of all the countries' religions.' But the opposition on its part says this is true because, 'non-Muslims face discrimination and are kept out of the highest levels of government.'³⁰

Thus, all these reports give a glimpse into the religious activities in the country during the years under study. It points to the fact that being

29. *Ibid.*, 05/10/2003

30. BBC News, 20/12/2003

a multi-racial and multi-religious, Malaysia has its own fair share of religious tension and crisis, as it is expected of this kind of society – though it has managed, largely, to contain these tensions and keep the country at peace.

Analysis

Looking at all the reports above, it is clear that there were religious tensions in the country during the period under study as it was a time of volatile religious issues and crisis both in the country and internationally, especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States of America.

The government of Malaysia understands perfectly well the volatile nature of the nation under their control and they never missed any opportunity to sound it to the people on the need for tolerance, peace and harmonious living among all the different religious and racial groups in the nation. They were not only concern about that, the fact that the people were divided racially along religious lines makes the matter more critical, as any attempted attack on any ethnic group could be read along both lines – religion and ethnicity – as it happened in the case of the Kampung Medan attack on the Indians by the Malays. This is so, as it has been explained above, because the Malays who are the majority are Muslims, the Chinese, who comes after the Malays in terms of number, are Buddhists, Taoists, Confucius or Christians, while the Indians are predominantly Hindus.

However, looking at all the statements of the government officials and the reports generally, it will be noticed that most of them are directed at the Malays, since they form the majority and their religion is the officially recognized religion by the country. And the bulk of the religious crisis and tension were caused by their activities, as some of them were bent on making the whole nation follow their religious line of thought.

One other factor which contributes to the religious tension is the agenda of the opposition Islamic party, which condemned the Islam of the ruling government and advocated a more stringent implementation of

the Islamic laws whether to Muslims or non-Muslims. They seem to hold the belief that since the Malays form the majority and they are overwhelmingly Muslims, everything in the nation should follow and should be based on Islam, as the minority has to bend to the majority. This was, however, opposed by the ruling government who believe that there should be religious freedom for all and that it is enough to have Islam as the official recognized religion and since the government is actively promoting the religion, its laws and teachings should not be forcefully imposed on others. Thus, their approach is to be moderate in practicing Islam and tolerate other religions. This therefore forms a major ground of disagreement between the two political parties. But it seems that the people are generally more disposed to the type of moderate Islam being preached by the ruling party, as well as other racial religious groups, who know that their interest and well being is only guaranteed under the ruling government. This, thus, explains the reason why the ruling party always has the majority vote in any election.

The activities of the youths is, however, a torn in the flesh of the government and the people, especially the issue of the Maunah and the aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S and its allies, which was seen as an aggression on Islam and Muslims because the U.S was not able to prove, substantially, that it was Bin Laden and his group that attacked the World Trade Centre on September 11.

The Maunah saga brought to fore the activities of the extremist youths. And from all indication, it seems that this group and all others had been in existence and had been carrying out their extreme acts, but it was not until the government itself was threatened that action was taken against them. And a pointer to this fact was the identification of about 44 groups which preach and teach deviant attitude to the people after the Maunah group was clamped down. The fact that the group had the audacity to attack military camps shows the depth of their activities which had gone unnoticed prior to the attack. And the clamp down on others like it after this incident was seen as a good riddance to nuisances by the people, which is long over due. The heavy punishment that was handed down to the leader of this group and two of its other members also goes a long in helping to make others backslide from such activities, as the death

sentence shows the will of the government to deal ruthlessly with any form of extremism in future. And it helped clipped the wings of the extremists and exuberant youths.

The resultant violence on the Christian churches after the invasion of Afghanistan was also ably contained by the government and it did not generate any rumbles because the entire world was also in turmoil at that time and every nation had its own share of the anger of the Muslims on its domestic scene.

But after the anger of the event had calm down, it seems there was little to talk about as many were afraid to be label as a terrorist, and the attention was shifted to the issue of terror while the government was stern in warning its citizen to be on guard and not to allow their country to be turned into another battle field, like most of the Muslim nations, on the excuse of terrorism. Thus one noticed that much of the talk was on how to curb the activities of terrorists and a warning that they are not welcome and will not be allowed or given a safe haven in Malaysia.

Conclusion

One can conclude this research by saying that during the period under study, there were religious tension in Malaysia and it got to its zenith with the Maunah case. However, the government was able to put things under control by showing a strong will of not tolerating any extreme acts from any quarters be it from the Muslims, who form the majority or non-Muslims, who are the minority.

The issue was on two fronts, religious and political. The religious aspect was within the populace. It was effectively control through a constant reminder from the government by talking on the need for tolerance and moderation and by constantly citing or giving examples of nations that had gone through and are going through one or the other religious crisis, which have turned their nations to a battle ground and inhabitable. The political part was also contained by the populace themselves through voting for the ruling government again during election time. Though most of the people were not happy with the

government during the election period due to the issue of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, they none the less prefer a moderate government to an extreme one which may lead to problem and chaos in the nation. Though the ruling government lost some votes, the coalition of other parties and non-Muslims that joined it and voted for it massively enabled it to edge out the Islamic party, PAS, and ensured it continuity in government. Thus the majority, though dissatisfied, prefer a moderate approach to religion and a peaceful co-existence in a multi-racial and multi-religious nation.

To sum up the religious tension during this period, though very serious, did not balloon into a major crisis as it was effectively contained and control by the government and the will of the majority of the people.

Bibliography

1. Amstrong, Karen, 2000. *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
2. Canillieri, Joseph A. & Chandra Muzaffar (eds.), 1998. *Globalization: The Perspective and Experiences of the Religious Traditions of Asia Pacific*, Selangor: Just World.
3. Esposito, John and Voll, John A., 1996. *Islam and Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Faruqi, Ismail Raji, 1998. *Islam and Other Faiths*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation.
5. Hassan, M. Kamal, 1996. *Towards Actualizing Islamic Ethical and Educational Principles in Malaysian Society: Some Critical Observation*. Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia.
———, *Intellectual Discourse at the End of the 2nd Millenium: Concerns of A Muslim-Malay CEO*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2001
6. Liu, Ong Puay, "Values that preserves humanity", *The Sunday Star*, 21 May, 2000
7. Mehden, Fred R. Von Der, 1986. *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia*, New York: Syracuse University Press.
8. Mohd. Yasin, Norashimah, 2004. *Islamization/Malaysization*, Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen.
9. Mutalib, Husin, 1990. *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Singapore: Oxford University Press.
———, 1993. *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?*, Singapore: Oxford University Press.

10. Muzaffar, Chandra, 1987. *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti.
11. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, 1993. *Islam and the Challenge of the 21st Century*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
12. Noor, Mansor Mohd "New Dimensions of Social Conflicts in Malaysia: Learning from Ethnic Conflict in Kampung Rawa, Penang", <http://seacsn.cspu-ugm.or.id/papers/regionalws1/mansor.html>
13. Syed Hassan, Sharifah Zaleha, 2001. "Islamization and the Emerging Civil Society in Malaysia", in Nakamura Mitsuo, *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
14. Yousif, Ahmad, 1998. *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: An Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience*, Thinker's Library: Kuala Lumpur.