SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA: COULD THE CAUSE BE RELIGIOUS?

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Rencana ini melihat dan membezakan dua kes konflik sosial iaitu di Indonesia dan di Malaysia dengan tujuan untuk mengkaji sejauh manakah keduanya melibatkan aspek-aspek agama.. Tumpuan diberikan kepada konflik etnik yang memuncak selepas krisis ekonomi yang melanda negara-negara Asia termasuk Malaysia dan Indonesia. Terdapat persamaan di beberapa kawasan dalam kedua negara tersebut terutama sekali persamaan yang melibatkan penekanan kepada matlamat akhir yang tertentu, samada agama dan etnisiti, ataupun kestabilan dan pembangunan ekonomi. Walau bagaimana pun, perbezaan berkenaan persoalan matlamat akhir yang melibatkan perkara-perkara di atas di kedua negara menyaksikan hasil yang berbeza selepas pilihanraya umum di Malaysia dan Indonesia. Rencana ini juga seterusnya mengupas isu konflik sosial dan peranan agama dengan membincangkannya dengan menggunakan beberapa teori dalam bidang sosiologi.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and Indonesia are countries having a diverse socio-cultural population. Malaysia has a population of 23 million and has an estimated 200 ethnic groups. While Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation, houses 210 million people spreading over 17,000 ethnically-diversed islands.

In this paper the writer focuses on the economic crisis of 1997 and the national elections carried out in both countries in order to understand the dynamism of religion and other social forces as influences on the behavioural patterns of Malaysian and Indonesian societies.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN INDONESIA

In Indonesia, the economic crisis exposed the greedy international capitalists and the bad governance of the local elites. Their exchanges of mutual benefits, i.e. economic gain to the former and political gain to the latter, among others, resulted in cronyism, nepotism and corrupt practices. Among the eventual consequence observed was the unequal development between Jakarta and the outlying islands as well as along the dimensions of class, ethnicity and religion. The end product was the destabilisation of the nation (McLeod, 1997, Morrissey and Nelson, 1999). Though democracy and development were the issues raised in the 'street democracy' carried out by students and the masses which saw Suharto being replaced by Habibie, the immediate social fallout was manifested in terms of ethnic, religious and regional dimensions (Hill, 1998).

News of Chinese shops being looted and burnt and some Chinese being physically assaulted and raped, caused many Indonesians of Chinese origin to flee the country. Those Chinese who were Muslims sought safety by declaring their religiosity and parading Islamic symbols such as head caps and others symbols. These social episodes show that ethnic and religious differences became significant again, despite the process of localization of the Chinese community in the Indonesian policy as well as through linguistic and cultural assimilation.

The significance of ethnic division between the Chinese and the Pribumi, spread to the religious dimension as well as the Muslims and the Christians started to inflict physical pain on each other and got involved in activities such as burning places of worship.

The atrocities did not end there. On the island of Maluku it re-emerged in terms of sub-ethnic differences between the Madura Islanders and the Javanese. In Kalimantan, the sub-ethnic groups of the Javanese, Dayak and the Chinese combined to attack the Madurese.

Other voices of regional secessions were also heard, especially in East Timur, Acheh, Ambon and Irian Jaya (Kahin, 1985). These national crises, especially the atrocities in East Timur, brought international pressures on to Indonesia to carry out a referendum to decide its future. This international call was agreed upon and the agreement opened up the way for the eventual independence of East Timur, as well as opening the door to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to intervene in the Indonesian economy.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN MALAYSIA

The economic crisis did not lead Malaysians of Malay, Iban, Kadazan-Dusun, Chinese, Indian and other extractions to interpret this problem in terms of ethnic and religious differences. A Malay found out during the economic crisis that a cabbage bought from a Malay vegetable seller could be just as expensive as that purchased from Chinese and Indian sellers. An Indian who wanted to buy *roti canai* found that the price had increased regardless of the ethnic stall he went to.

Market forces caused the economic crisis rather than ethnic or religious differences. Malay, Iban, Kadazan-Dusun, Chinese, Indian and other Malaysians found out that prices of goods would be increase if it contained imported items. No reports of shop being burnt down or the other ethnic groups being harassed have emerged (Mansor, 1999).

The economic crisis was interpreted, like in the Indonesian case as being caused by the greedy capitalists and bad governance but without attaching ethnic and religious significance to it. The Anwar saga compounded the economic crisis as it sharpened the issue of bad governance into a political problem and calls of "Reformasi" were raised to demand greater democratisation in the country.

Farish (1999) shows that the "Reformasi" movement which comprised "Suara Rakyat Malaysia" (SUARAM), "Angkatan Belia Islam" (ABIM), "Jemaah Islamiah Islam" (JIM) and others brought together Malays, Chinese, Indians and others who were concerned over issues of justice, accountability and transparency in governing the country. Individual reasons for these diverse groups coming together might not coincide but the issues they raised and the solutions they sought had a common end: the replacement of the present government and leadership.

THE ROAD TO ELECTION IN INDONESIA

The Indonesian national election of 1999 saw the "Partai Golongan Karya" (GOLKAR), the ruling political party, wanting to renew the mandate. The urban and middle class Chinese and Pribumis came together to form an alliance under the "Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan" (PDI-P). While the other Pribumis who were more inclined toward religion had over 17 Islamic-based political parties, including the "Partai Persatuan Pembangunan" (PPP), "Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa"

(PKB), and "Partai Amanah Nasional" (PAN) to compete for their votes.

The Pribumi-Chinese and Muslim-Christian conflicts taking place heightened the concern for ethnic and religious considerations, especially on the part of the Pribumi. Islam was the main mobilising agent and PAN even discouraged Muslims from voting for non-Muslim candidates. The moderate PKB, however, publicly disagreed with such calls. Intra-religious conflict within Islam did take place between the Islamic traditionalists and reformists, especially on the Island of Java and Sumatra.

The election results did not give any political party a majority. PDI-P managed to capture 38 percent of the votes, GOLKAR over 20 percent, PKB 18 percent, and PPP and PAN a single digit percent each. It was observed that the majority of the Muslim voters shunned the religiously-based political parties. However, the peculiar system of leadership election in Indonesia saw the ascendancy of the Islamically inclined leaders with Gus Dur as the President, Megawati Sukarno as the Vice President and Amien Rais as the leader of the People Representative Council (MPR).

Election and change of government did not end the social, ethnic and religious conflicts in Indonesia. Ambon and Maluku still recorded religious conflicts between Islam and Christian groups and the calls for independence were increasingly being heard not only in East Timur but also in Acheh, Ambon and Irian Jaya.

THE ROAD TO ELECTION IN MALAYSIA

The economic and political crises taking place in Malaysia had raised the interest of the people to change the government and its leadership. A snap national election was called in November 1999.

The National Front (Barisan Nasional or BN) which consists of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and others, faced an Alternative Front (Barisan Alternative or BA) comprising the Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS), Justice Party, People's Party (PRM) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Quite a number of leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in the "Reformasi" movement also participated in the election as candidates under the banner of the Alternative Front.

Both the BN and the BA predicted that their own coalition fronts would win the election and form the government. At the least the BA expected to reduce the majority of the BN in Parliament and hoped that two or more states would fall into their control.

The election results returned the BN to lead the country with a two thirds majority. The BN maintained its stronghold in all the state assemblies except Kelantan and Trengganu, both of which fell to the BA with PAS as the main ruling party. PAS also made in-roads in Kedah, Pahang and Perlis. The DAP maintained its 10 parliamentary seats but its national leaders, mainly Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, were booted out. The Justice Party managed to obtain 5 parliamentary and 4 state seats. The PRM failed to win any seat (Funston, 2000).

The BN came back with a two thirds majority in Parliament and at the state levels mainly on the strength of the Chinese voters who voted for UMNO's political partners of MCA and Gerakan rather than the BA. PAS increased its Parliamentary seats to 27 (doubling its best performance before) and two state assemblies came under their control because the Malays changed their choice from UMNO to PAS.

Malay and Chinese voters were not voting on ethnic issues but rather on issues of development, governance and religion. The Chinese voters gave priority to development, governance and religion while the Malays placed their priorities in the reverse order. Islam became the binding force for the Malays while the Chinese gave precedence to development (Funston, 2000; Weiss, 1999).

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CONFLICTS THROUGH THEORITICAL LENSES

Blumer, (1965), Miles, (1982) and Milne (1979) and others see the *sui generis* nature of ethnicity and religion on the behaviour of its members. They see industrialisation, modernisation and development as processes that will concretised the 'plural society of the Furnivallian tradition' and 'primordial sentiment' of Geertz (1973).

Furnivall (1948) describes a plural society as one in which the ethnic groups are compartmentalised from one another; they are isolated and separated from one another by ethnic origin, religion, language, culture, values, works, leadership etc. They meet in the market-place but to exchange, with no value consensus binding them together. Within the plural society tradition, Horowitz (1983) likens Malaysian society in the 1970's to an unstructured status system but within the theoretical work of Furnivall. Local academicians such as Raymond Lee (1989) and others also present Malaysian multi-ethnic society in that sense. The dominance of ethnic and religious parameters on individual behaviour are regarded as given.

The plural society theoretical approach could be employed to understand the dominance of particularistic and primordial tendencies in the Indonesian case, described above, as the economic crisis was interpreted as having ethnic and religious considerations. But the behavioural patterns of Malaysians will not fit within this theoretical framework because anomalies are observed. The Malay, Chinese, Indian and other individuals blamed the market force as the cause for the economic crisis rather than the traditional scapegoats like ethnicity and religion.

I would argue that the ethnic and religious factors would be relevant in explaining the behavioural patterns of the Malaysian groupings from the post-Second World War through the independence movement and post- independence era up till the 1970s. The political crisis and the social scenes prior to the ethnic riots of May 13th 1969 support the observation because Malay, Chinese, Indians and other Malaysians placed group considerations as their primary concern when relating to others (Means, 1970, 1991).

Analysing the electoral processes in Indonesia and Malaysia, one can sense that group parameters of ethnicity and religiosity tend to be dominant among the indigenous population; the Pribumis in Indonesia and the Malays in Malaysia. The Chinese communities in both countries were moulded by non-ethnic considerations of development and good governance in their voting behaviours. The fact that a large segment of the indigenous population in both countries also voted along non-ethnic and religious calculations shows that group concern is not *sui generis* and be taken for granted.

The social scenarios of the economic crisis and the election taking place in both countries indicate that some Pribumi, Chinese and others in Indonesia and, likewise among the Malays, Ibans, Kadazan-Dusuns, Chinese, Indians and other Malaysians,

might place ethnicity above other factors; some others would place ethnicity and religion over others; some would place status gains over others and in some cases, it would be gender over ethnic concerns etc. This shows that group could be primary or it could be secondary in importance. No group thus maintains itself. When the group changes, the individuals at the periphery also undergo changes.

If this is the case, then ethnicity or religion could be a cause and it could also be an effect. Under the latter situation, group boundaries could experience change as they strengthen, thin-out or dissolve. To locate the changing nature of this group boundary, an additional level of analysis should be employed better to understand the changes at the individual level. This would be in sharp contrast to the contemporary approach of focusing only on the social structure or group level.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY OF RACE, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Gambetta (1987) poses a question: 'did they jump or were they pushed?'. When our behaviours are the consequences of being pushed, then, the assumption of Durkheim as to the dominance of the society or the group over the individuals prevails. In this tradition, group phenomenons such as ethnic, race, religion, class, status, region, ideology, caste and so on are dominant in influencing human behaviours and we can locate such works by Weber, Marx and others, as well as many contemporary social sciences.

But as Gambetta says, our actions could be the consequence of own choice, that is, 'to jump'. Social scientists and sociologists often wish to avoid relegating individual actions to the realm of social psychology or psychology. Classical sociologists such as, among others, Weber have been arguing that social sciences can be a science because social actions are meaningful. Weber argues that human actions are meaningful because these social actions are moulded by the calculations of substantive and the formal rationalities. Substantive rationality is associated with value-based dimensions such as social obligation, trust, friendship, eternal gains and etc., while formal rationality refers to the calculation of material and status gains. As social actions are meaningful rather than ad hoc, such behaviour repeat itself into a pattern. Thus individual actions do manifest in terms of aggregate behaviour and such behavioural patterns should be of concern to social scientists and sociologists (Craib, 1997).

The premises of the rational choice theory are:

1. Individuals have diverse goals and preferences

2. Individuals act to maximise benefit

3. Individual action is the function of his own sentiment and the beliefs of his peer groups

4. Once an individual makes a choice of action, it closes other behavioural options

5. As an individual acts on the choice of action taken, he develops social bonds with other individuals which could be stronger than his other primary social ties

6. As an individual fails to maximise benefit, he mobilises collective action. The dimensions to be chosen would reflect the historical-cultural context of that particular society.

7. As an individual fails to maximise his benefits through the material dimension, he turns to the divine

Michael Banton (1983) links rational choice theory to ethnic and race relations on the premises that:

1. Individuals employ physical and cultural characteristics of other individuals in the process of exclusion or inclusion

2. When an individual categorises other individuals on the basis of physical characteristics it tends to be exclusive, while categorisation on the basis of cultural characteristics tends to be inclusive

3. The form and intensity of group relations tend to have different consequences on group boundary. Individual competition reduces group boundary and group competition increases group boundary

Taking the cue from Barth (1969) that sociologists should be concerned not with the constituents of the group but its boundary, rational choice theory sees social structures such as ethnic, race, class, status, religion, nationality etc., not as

unchanging but more fluid in nature, constantly being challenged, changed, altered and reconstructed.

Thus social relations between individuals and across group borders should be analysed from the individual and group alignments. If individuals are concerned over material, status and personal obligation rather than group dimensions of ethnic, religion, class, status, gender, nationality or other group alignments, then his group identity is 'thin' or secondary in nature. If the reverse is the observation, then one interprets his actions as coloured by concerns over group demand and the concerns for material, status and personal obligations will be sacrificed. Only by taking the individual and group analyses can social scientists answer Gambetta's question of whether the individual was 'pushed or he jumped'.

REINTERPRETING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE ELECTIONS IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

The above theoretical exploration opens the possibility that the parameters of group boundary of ethnicity and religion could be the forces that influence the behavioural patterns of the Pribumis and Chinese in Indonesia as well as the Malays, Ibans, Kadazan-Dusuns, Chinese, Indians and others in Malaysia. Put differently, universalistic norms of concern with material, status, and personal obligations rather than particularism and primordialism, are moulding these individual choices of actions.

The reaction to the economic crisis and the voting behaviour show that the Pribumis in Indonesia were more concerned by ethnic and religious calculations in their relations with the Chinese and the Christian groupings. In Malaysia, the blame of the economic crisis was squarely placed on the market forces. Yet their electoral behaviour did show some similarities but also distinct differences. Malays, Ibans, Kadazan-Dusuns, Chinese, Indians and others were concurred about the issue of governance but Malays in the northern and eastern regions of Peninsular Malaysia gave priority to religion. In contrast, the priority of the Chinese and the Malays on the western and the southern regions of Peninsular Malaysia was development.

Since ethnic and religion could be an effect rather than a cause, one could ask two questions. The first is why did the Chinese and the Pribumis on the island of Java in Indonesia as well as Chinese and the Malays in the western and southern regions of

Peninsular Malaysia as well as the East Malaysians place a low priority on ethnic and religious calculations relative to the Pribumi in Indonesia and Malays in the northern and eastern regions of Peninsular Malaysia? The answer may lie not in their ethnic and religious differences but in their differential rates of exposure and participation in the commercial and modern economic sectors.

The high rate of economic growth of the last two decades prior to the economic crisis in 1997 in Indonesia and Malaysia have generated social mobility and an expanding middle class. In Indonesia, it was the urban and middle classes of the Chinese and Pribumi that gave the 36 percent vote to PDI-P.

In Malaysia the less disruptive social consequence of the economic crisis was because of her better economic advantage relative to Indonesia. The steps taken to overcome the externally generated recession as foreign capital fled the country contributed to returning the BN into power again. Concern for political stability and the priority given to development by the Chinese and the Malays in the western and southern regions of Peninsular Malaysia, as well as the East Malaysians, caused the Justice Party's 'street demonstrations' to fail and cost the DAP stalwarts their parliamentary and state seats. The DAP's electoral pact with the BA, which saw them collaborating with PAS, a party, which had continuously pushed for an Islamic State and the implementation of the Hudud Law, further displeased the Chinese and the urban-middle class Malays in the western and southern regions of Peninsular Malaysia.

The second question we should ask is why did the Pribumis of Indonesia and the Malays in the northern and eastern regions of Peninsular Malaysia became adamantly pro-ethnic and pro-religion? Their giving priority to ethnicity and religion is not solely internal to the respective dimensions but also a reaction to their social insecurities. These areas and regions have often depicted behavioural patterns which give precedence to ethno-religious calculation, relative to material and status gains. Their regions were the backwater of development, their standard of living below the national level and their population characterised by out-migration. In the Indonesian case, inequalities between ethnic Chinese vis-a-vis the Pribumis and Jakarta vis-à-vis the other outlying areas and outer islands are extremely high. This is one reason why there have been calls for secession in East Timur, Acheh, Ambon, Maluku and Irian Jaya, which could lead to the possible 'Balkanisation' of Indonesia. Unequal impacts of development have isolated these areas from the positive effects of development and modernization. Hence, the

continuing social dislocation and the deepening of ethno-religious worldview among them. Such ethno-religious world view, as pointed out by Marx, represents their 'sighs of the exploitation and oppression experienced' as well as a social protest against the continuing inequalities taking place in their midst.

In Malaysia, the last two decades of development coincided with an attempt on the part of the government to make Islam meaningful and relevant to development. The government's interpretation of Islam is more progressive and creative as it nurtures religion as a system and a way of life. Such interpretations link the material world to the divine; science, technology and development leads to material as well divine rewards. This shifting paradigm changes the traditional Muslim worldview that Islam is ritual, restrictive and negative; separating the world as sacred and profane.

However, such a breakthrough in defining religion was followed also by a concerted government bashing of religious leaders, religious movements and traditional religious interpretation of what is 'the true Islam', much to the chagrin of the Malays who saw this act as political. The Malays saw a desire on the part of the government to mortgage God and religion for materialism and esteem, which they found distasteful. The Kampung Rawa Incident of 1997, which saw Indian Hindus on one side and Indian-Malay Muslims on the other side, confronting each other over the proximity of a Hindu temple and Muslim mosque, and the case of a Malay girl marrying a Christian Indian were examples of the manifestation of the hardening of religious sentiments and insecurities. The Anwar saga and mega projects, which reflect more the weaknesses of the governing group, were coloured with religious arguments to the dismay of the government. PAS exploited this religious insecurity of the Malays as well and it led to their success in the last election.

CONCLUSION

Ethno-religious conflict can be extraordinarily bitter and is often destructive. The parties involved in the dispute view themselves not only as representatives of their blood fraternities but also link the conflict to supra-individual claims of fighting not only for themselves but for a cause. This can give the conflict a radicalism and mercilessness a scale beyond comprehension. Because they have no consideration for themselves, they have none for others either; they are convinced that they are entitled to make anybody a victim of the idea for which they sacrifice themselves (Kurtz, 1995).

But if we realise that ethnicity and religion as parameters of group boundary that could be a cause and an effect, then we have to continuously monitor group and individual alignments so that social engineering could be planned and implemented. The objectives are to influence the form and intensity of competition in order to reduce group boundaries and enhance the cutting of cross-border ties.

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