Source: *The Straits Times,* pA26
Date: 13 October 2016

S.E.A.View

Malaysia's troubled Muslim-Hindu ties



Syed Farid Alatas

For The Straits Times

Although Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country, the understanding of many Malaysians since independence in 1957 was that the minority religions and races ought not to be made to feel threatened that they would not be able to maintain their respective identities and promote their cultures. This understanding was based on the belief that there was sufficient political and cultural space for all religions and cultures to thrive while Islam continued to be the state religion.

The belief in the possibility of harmonious co-existence between the different communities in the country has recently been shaken due to the assertion of a more exclusivist Muslim identity among the religious and political elite. This has affected Malaysians' perceptions of the state of ethnic and religious harmony in the country. A case in point is the relations between Hindus and Muslims in the country. Recent incidents involving Hindus and Muslims serve to heighten fears that Malaysian harmony is gradually being eroded.

The decades of peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims are slowly giving way to a more intolerant stance taken by some Malays in which a Malay-Muslim identity is stressed at the expense of non-Muslims, sometimes resulting in the denigration of their ethnicity and religions. For example, in June this year, Malaysians were shocked to learn that in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's (UTM) Islamic and Asian Civilisations module, derogatory remarks were made about both Hinduism and the Sikh faith.

What was so insulting about the content of the module was that the lecturer claimed that Islam had introduced civility to the lives of Hindus in India. It was also said that Hindus preferred to be "dirty", and that it was only Islam that had taught Hindu converts to Islam the importance of cleanliness. Although UTM conducted a probe and subsequently terminated the service of the offending lecturer, it was astonishing to many that such content could be taught at a university. The UTM fiasco was not the only example of bigotry against Hindus. There were five cases of Hindu temples being vandalised in recent months in Perak and Penang. While these are all isolated incidents, they have led many to wonder if this is the beginning of the onset of mistrust and intolerance between Malaysia's different racial and religious communities.

Muslims in Malaysia should think more about who their Hindu countrymen are. One way to do so is to acquaint themselves with the writings of Abu al-Rayhan Al-Biruni, a Muslim scholar who was an authority on the religions of India. Born in 973 in Khwarazm in what is present-day Uzbekistan, Al-Biruni was in the court of Mahmud Ghaznavi (979-1030), the ruler of an empire that included parts of what is now known as Afghanistan, Iran and northern India. Al-Biruni travelled to India with the troops of Mahmud and lived there for years, during which time he mastered Sanskrit, translated a number of Indian religious texts to Arabic, studied Indian religious doctrines and wrote several books and treatises, including the Kitab Fi Tahqiq Ma li-l-Hind (The Book of What Constitutes India).

He refrained from making value judgments about other religions from an Islamic perspective. He was very conscious of the need to present India as understood by Indians themselves. In order to do so, he quoted extensively from Sanskrit texts. His objective was to study the religions of India in order to bring the two communities closer together. He states that the reason for embarking on his research on India was to provide Muslims the essential facts they would need when they encountered Indians and wished to discuss with them aspects of Indian religion and culture.

Al-Biruni considered such dialogue with Indians as crucial as it would create more understanding on issues about which Muslims remained very vague, as far as their understanding of Indian religions was concerned.

It was also his view that the Indians believed in a single god, by which he meant the same god that is worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims. He was the first scholar, in the Muslim world as well as the West, who approached the study of Indian religions objectively and avoided treating the Indians as mere heretics.

Malaysia is generally speaking a harmonious society. But, the political developments of recent years, which have seen an unhealthy development of identity politics in the form of, among other things, reckless statements made by politicians, religious leaders and educators, threaten to upset the current harmony that informs our society. This will potentially affect Hindu-Muslim relations.

The worrying trend in Hindu-Muslim relations suggests that there is clearly a need for dialogue between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Malaysia. The purpose of this dialogue would be to examine the commonalities in values, beliefs and culture that exist between Hinduism and Islam and to reaffirm the commitment that the two communities have to peaceful co-existence.

It is vital, for the sake of maintaining mutual respect and tranquillity in this country, that the political and religious leaders continuously speak out against bigotry and violence in the name of religion. Muslim leaders have a particularly greater responsibility in view of the fact that Islam is the religion of state in Malaysia. This means that the Muslim political and religious elite should not merely tolerate the presence of non-Muslim minorities but actively protect their rights and property.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is an associate professor in the departments of sociology and Malay studies at the National University of Singapore.

• S.E.A. View is a weekly column on South-east Asian affairs.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.