

Don't let mob rule prevail

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SISTERS in Islam was one of three non-governmental organisations mentioned at the recent Umno assembly as being party to undermining Islamic values through its talks and publications. SIS executive director ZAINAH ANWAR speaks about the delicate subject and other issues close to the organisation.

Q. Why do you think that at the recent Umno assembly, SIS was singled out from among the Muslim groups?

Zainah: We were singled out because we are a group of Muslim women and men who are a part of civil society that stands in the way of a political project to rewrite the Constitution and the social contract to establish an Islamist political and social order.

Thus our work is constructed into an anti-Islam, anti-God, anti-syariah, and even an anti-Malay ideology in order to demonise and delegitimise us.

But the accusations against us grossly misrepresent the work of Sisters in Islam. How can those who speak out against the discriminations and injustices that women suffer under the syariah system and constantly engage with the Government to ensure that the Islamic legal and judicial system delivers justice, be accused of undermining Islam?

It is our love for Islam, our belief in a just God and the importance of faith in our lives today that compels us to speak out to ensure that only justice can be the product of laws and policies that speak the name of Islam.

Q. The PM has expressed his fear of growing ultra-conservatism. Why is this trend taking place in Malaysia, which prides itself on being modern and progressive?

Zainah: This is not a new trend, nor peculiar to Malaysia or the Muslim world. Look at the rise of the "religious right" in the United States and the Shiv Sena in India and their impact on politics and culture and the ensuing national divide.

In Muslim countries, Islamism as a political ideology becomes an idiom of protest.

In these confused and disturbing times, people seek refuge in absolute truths as they provide certainty and bring clear meaning to their lives.

However, as Malaysia's democracy matures, citizens are more aware of their rights and are not willing to be silenced anymore in the face of discrimination.

Thus women speak out when they are treated unjustly, non-Muslims speak out when their

constitutional rights are violated, parents speak out when their children are detained and abused during moral policing raids.

The press no longer sweeps these issues under the carpet.

In fact, the Government's response to all these issues has largely come on the side of rule of law and justice.

Where it began to turn sour was when Islamist parties turned to mob mobilisation and threats of violence, and demonised citizens' actions to redress wrongs as an insult to Islam.

I believe the 2004 election results spooked the Islamists. The openness of the Abdullah administration and the strengthening of civil society and democratic culture were throttling their political project.

If they do not strike now, all will be lost as the trajectory towards progress and reform gathers steam.

Thus the counter mobilisation began.

The demonstrations and denunciations in mosques and suraus, the death threat, the tactical sprouting of several new NGOs, the rolling conferences and gatherings on Bahaya Islam Liberal (Dangers of a Liberal Islam) and Bahaya Murtad (Dangers of Apostasy) all over the country, the alarmist and inflammatory leaflets and SMSes on Islam DiHina, Islam DiCabar (Islam has been maligned and challenged), the fatwa on liberalism, pluralism, Kongsu Raya - all intended to create a sense of crisis.

Instead of developing a civic culture of public engagement, they chose mob tactics to manufacture fears and anxieties to serve a political cause.

A gag order was issued, but ironically it applies only to those who believe in the Constitution and rule of law.

Q. Is SIS practising liberal Islam? What is liberal Islam by your definition?

Zainah: SIS has never defined itself as liberal Muslims. Again, that is a construct imposed on us in order to create a strawman to be demolished and demonised.

We believe in the necessity of understanding Islam within the context of changing times and circumstances to ensure that the message of justice, equality, freedom and dignity insistent in the teachings of Islam will forever remain valid, relevant and universal.

Q. Why has the murtad issue become so talked about? Is it real or an imagined threat?

Zainah: It is not the SIS mission to encourage Muslims to leave Islam. If at all, many have thanked us for not only helping them keep their faith in Islam, but more, for strengthening it.

Non-Muslims have even told us that if they were living in the West, they would convert to Islam because SIS has shown them the compelling justice and beauty of the faith.

And look, we tried to get to the source of the Perak Mufti's allegation of 100,000 having left Islam and 250,000 waiting to become apostates.

We called up his office and were told the figures included punk rockers and black metal followers!

We called the Faith Rehabilitation Centre in Jelebu and spoke to an official who said there's hardly anyone to rehabilitate.

We wrote to the Registration Department and their figures show about 100-150 annually applying to remove Islam from their identity cards.

Most are converts whose marriages have failed, or those who were never brought up as Muslims because of broken families.

We therefore question the motive behind this fabrication of figures and scare mongering by SMS. Is this also a part of the political project?

Q. The recent Umno assembly showed that mainstream Malays - both men and women - seem to have difficulties in accepting SIS' position. How do you plan to overcome this hurdle?

Zainah: SIS cannot have existed, thrived and survived for almost 20 years within a Muslim context if there is no support for our message of justice in Islam.

If at all, the demand for our work, the relevance of our message is even more resounding at the national and international levels.

Those who need us find us. In spite of the attacks, we still receive e-mails, letters, phone calls, drop-ins from hundreds of women and some men every year, seeking our legal advice and moral support in their search for just solutions to their marital conflicts.

Our publications have been translated into Mandarin, Urdu, Bengali, Dari and Pashtu. And soon into Arabic.

Obviously this world is ready for a message of justice and equality in Islam. That should be a cause for celebration for Muslims, not a cause of threat.

Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

Malaysian Muslims are well poised to take the lead in this growing international movement for gender and social justice in Islam; but it might just pass us by if we allow mob rule to prevail and political powers to come undone.

P.S.

* From The Star Online: <http://archives.thestar.com.my/search/default.aspx?query=mob>