

Malaysia: Toxic religiosity is more dangerous than our ineffective politicians and civil servants

Saturday 4 April 2020, by [THAYAPARAN S](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2020).

The one idea that would most damage this country's efforts in combating the Covid-19 virus is toxic religiosity. Not only this country, but also any country that has a religious component that is incestuously entwined with the political apparatus.

In America, for instance, the megachurch impresario Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne was recently arrested for defying a "stay at home" order issued by the authorities of Hillsborough County (Florida). The pastor had bused in parishioners and held a prayer vigil which sounded more like a political rally.

Howard-Browne, who prayed over the President of the US, Donald Trump, has argued, among other things, that the coronavirus was a hoax, that it was released by China to cripple the US, that globalists were subverting the US economy and that Russia, China and Iran were planning to launch an attack against the US.

Shockingly, all these are mainstream narratives for a certain segment of the US population are enabled by a Trumpian political class and online agitators. Normally, the antics of these buffoons would not be newsworthy but in the era of the coronavirus, the reality is that small groups of people can have a huge impact on the rest of society.

While it is easy to dismiss their ideas, it is harder to ignore the impact of their defiance of public health orders and the impact this has on communities who may not share their views and, of course, the health infrastructure.

Now, some say that let these idiots kill themselves if they want to, but the problem is that these "idiots" will take the rest of us down with them. The reality is that a small number of uninformed, ignorant people acting on their faith could destroy the majority of us. They say ignorance kills but when it comes to ignorance enabled by religious fervour, it is worse.

In India, we have been witness to the state security apparatus breaking up religious gatherings and hitting adherents who refuse to comply with their restricted movement orders. India is struggling with this issue and the reality is that although class does play a part in this, the news media has been shocked by the encouraging of personalities who are claiming that this virus should not affect religious "obligations".

In Malaysia, there are troubling signs that the political apparatus has not been able to get a handle on the religious tributaries that flow from the vast religious bureaucracy. Ismail Sabri Yaakob said last Saturday that there were still several mosques that were defying the movement control order (MCO).

"I've been made to understand that there are still five mosques continuing to have their Solat Jumaat (Friday prayers) despite the orders not to open and to pray at home. "Yesterday, in one of the districts a mosque had their Solat Jumaat and as a result, 116 people who attended the prayers have been arrested by the police," Ismail said.

Not only that, but hundreds of "foreign" workers were arrested around the same time for preparing to hold prayers in large groups despite an order from the federal authorities to restrict movements and gatherings.

Think about this for a minute. Not only has the state security apparatus and its various affiliates have to deal with citizens who flaunt the law for various reasons – some unintentional – they have to also be cognisant of the fact that there are people out there who are intentionally defying the law on religious grounds.

Part of the problem is that the religious bureaucracy has, for decades, been enforcing diktats that made it mandatory for communal prayer. Now, what state and religious personalities are attempting to do is encourage adherents to pray at home, in solitude. This is anathema to some religious people.

Add to this we have a migrant population – let us not be politically correct – who never had much use for the state security apparatus for various reasons and who congregate and pray in groups as is their cultural and religious custom. This is not going to change merely because the state decides that its laws supersede any religious obligations they believe they have. That's the trouble with indoctrination, right?

As a former political operative from Umno recently told me, "One of the problems that the government has is that it really has no idea how big the 'religious industry' is here in Malaysia. Take religious schools, while there has been some tightening of rules for such establishments, nobody wants to be viewed as going against religious education. So, in all honesty, nobody really knows what going on until something bad happens."

Mujahid Yusof Rawa, Pakatan Harpan's former religious czar, who found Zakir Naik inspiring, also is part of the problem. He enabled the religious bureaucracy and made the false equivalence argument in presenting liberals and religious extremists as one and the same. Liberals are staying at home or are busy trying to feed disenfranchised people while the religious extremists are defying the laws of the land and putting the whole of Malaysia in danger. Are they both the same, Mr Mujahid?

In an interview recently, the Singapore foreign minister said something extremely interesting about this pandemic. He said, "In fact, this is an acid test of every single country's quality of healthcare, standard of governance and social capital. If any one of this tripod is weak, it will be exposed, and exposed quite unmercifully by this epidemic."

What this has exposed in this country is that toxic religiosity has always been the genie in the bottle carelessly handled by the vast religious bureaucracy.

This pandemic has cracked that bottle.

S THAYAPARAN

"In order to be a part of the totalitarian mindset, it is not necessary to wear a uniform or carry a club or a whip. It is only necessary to wish for your own subjection, and to delight in the subjection of others." - **Christopher Hitchens**

P.S.

Source: Malaysiakini