

Islam For All

by Tricia Yeoh

Islam Hadhari: Developmental Framework

For the first time in Malaysia, a religious framework has been instituted within a national socio-economic development plan. Islam Hadhari was introduced in the Ninth Malaysia Plan as a "comprehensive and universal framework for the nation". Indeed, upon examination Islam Hadhari is closely intertwined into many other chapters of the Plan, promoting "progressive developmental outlook" and "a moral and ethical society with strong religious and spiritual values and high ethical standards." This inclusion of religious principles within a Malaysia Plan has stirred a wave of interest in Islam Hadhari: what it is exactly, what its implications are, and how Malaysians should react.

Islam Hadhari literally translated means Civilisational Islam, and is a theory of government based upon the principles of Islam as derived from the holy Qur'an. It is an approach that seeks to emphasize development consistent with the central tenets of Islam. In particular, ten fundamental principles have been outlined and this includes faith and piety in Allah, a just and trustworthy government, freedom and independence to the people, and mastery of knowledge.

This initiative has been very much a brainchild of current Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who introduced the concept in a speech as early on as 2004, the same year he ascended into premiership. He has also penned the book "Islam Hadhari", which has been widely circulated. Many believe this step was taken in order to project a more moderate approach to Islam, which has recently been disparagingly targeted in international circles. What is interesting is that the Malaysian government is currently promoting Islam Hadhari, while no other country has yet adopted it as national policy. This also means that its definition is based purely upon one country's interpretation of Islam – Malaysia's.

However, it has also been emphasized that Islam Hadhari is not a new religion, teaching, nor a new *mazhab* (denomination). According to the official Islam Hadhari website of Malaysia, it is an effort to bring the Ummah back to basics, back to the Fundamentals as prescribed in the Qur'an and the Hadith that form the foundation of Islamic civilization. This article does not seek to delve into the theological or philosophical aspects of Islam Hadhari, but to explore the practical expression of it in Malaysian society.

Multiracial & Multireligious Malaysia

Malaysia, truly Asia. The multiple major religions of Asia are represented in this country: Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism and many others. In such a diverse and multicultural society, the call for harmony and peace amongst the various groups has always been a commitment of the government. National unity has been given primary importance, with a range of policies being implemented to this end, from educational to national language and national service policies.

The introduction of Islam Hadhari as a universal and comprehensive framework for national development implies that it will be applicable to all Malaysians alike. The question really is whether this is contradictory or complementary to the government's efforts at promoting national unity. The answer lies not in mere rhetoric, which unfortunately has been one of the criticisms of Islam Hadhari, but in its actual fleshing out of policy into practice.

One obvious indicator of whether Islam Hadhari will work constructively towards national unity or not is the public's response. This will therefore only serve to strengthen national solidarity if, and only if, *all* Malaysians alike receive it with welcoming arms.

A non-Muslim can only practise Max Weber's *verstehen*, placing oneself in a Muslim's psyche where possible – and I observe three things that would make perfect sense from a Muslim's perspective. Firstly, that Islam Hadhari should be advocated, since it combines entirely the elements of the fundamental and true Islam with aspects of modern development. It allows one to embrace progress whilst holding true to one's faith. Secondly, Islam is holistically applicable in all spheres of life, private and public. The Qur'an and Hadith certainly provide clear principles for this purpose. Finally, that such religious standards can and should be relevant for all people in all walks of life.

What then of the non-Muslim's response to the fact that Islamic values are to be assimilated into society? A basic question is whether these principles are really universal in nature. The very first of the ten main Islam Hadhari principles is "Faith and piety in Allah". Presumably, adherents of all religions that do not preach Allah would simply not be too comfortable with the requirement to subscribe to this teaching. This includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Sikhism – the other major religions of the country.

For the sake of argument, assuming these ten main principles themselves are universal, how realistic is it that they can be translated into universally accepted

practices? Despite having sound principles, policies are often a result of human interpretation. This is the real point of contention.

Cause for Concern?

That non-Muslims increasingly find it difficult to reconcile a sole religion as the basis of socio-economic development is a given. Whether or not these concerns are justified is another question. A spate of recent incidents has served to perpetuate some fears.

In October 2005, a non-Muslim student complained that she was barred from attending her university convocation ceremony because she refused to wear the tudung, or religious headscarf. Early this year, a directive was issued that all policewomen were obliged to wear the tudung for official ceremonies, whether or not they were Muslim. The failure of some girls to wear the tudung resulted in their removal from a school netball team. There have been recent incidents of Hindu temple cleansing in the Klang Valley, bulldozers completely obliterating 100-year-old deities. Local authorities want to prosecute couples for public indecency (holding hands) on the count this is un-Islamic. A forum discussing the rights of religious freedoms as held in the Federal Constitution was recently disrupted.

It is interesting to note that all these have taken place *after* the Islam Hadhari concept was introduced by Pak Lah himself in 2004.

I started with the premise that for Islam Hadhari to be considered constructive towards the Government's national unity efforts, it should be an acceptable concept to all Malaysians alike. Although its principles have been formulated to ensure it benefits Malaysia's multiracial society, its implementation process has begun to stir some anxiety. If recent cases listed above are examples of the actual expression of Islam Hadhari principles, then suffice to say that Islam Hadhari will not be well-received by the non-Muslim public. If, however, these are not good examples of Islam Hadhari, then greater effort must be taken by the Government to ensure it truly intends for it to live up to its name as a Civilisational and Progressive Islam. This is detrimental as it forms the very basis of socio-economic development for the next four years.

Both the principle and practice of any unifying policy needs to receive equal affirmation from all races in Malaysia. If Islam Hadhari in principle is something whose values all Malaysians alike can readily accept, this will be a tool to unite the country's diverse peoples. However, if this cannot be equally translated into an all-encompassing set of practices, it is potentially divisive in nature and must be rectified urgently.