ISLAMIC RESURGENCE IN MALAYSIA
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BEFORE we begin our analysis of Islamic resurgence we must take note of some general characteristics pertaining to Islam in Malaysia. According to the 1980 census there are 6.9 million Muslims in a population of 13.07 million. The rest are made up of Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and followers of Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions, together with followers of various folk religions and others. Since the fourteenth century, Islam has been the main religion in the Peninsula. It has maintained continuous, intimate ties with Malay state and society for several centuries.

All Malays are Muslims. This means that the majority of the indigenous people are Muslims. The overwhelming majority of non-Malays are non-Muslims. The non-indigenous communities, therefore, are predominantly non-Muslim. It is important to keep these ethno-religious categories in mind since they have some bearing upon our study.

Since 1957, when the country achieved independence, Islam has been the official religion of the Federation of Malaya. This does not in any way suggest that Malaysia is an Islamic State. For a state to be regarded as Islamic, the conventional attributes would be laws, policies and a political and administrative system based upon, and derived from, the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet Muhammad). The position of Islam as the official religion is essentially a recognition of its premier status in the evolution of the Malaysian polity, a status which for a long time expressed itself mainly through the performance of Muslim prayers at official functions, the construction of mosques by the State, the holding of Quran-reading competitions, and the organizing of the haj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca) through the agency of the government.
While the Malaysian Constitution recognizes the government’s obligation towards Islam, it also pledges to uphold freedom of worship and to allow non-Muslims to practise their own religions.  

Meaning

It is against this backdrop that Islamic resurgence is taking place. Islamic resurgence is a description of the endeavour to re-establish Islamic values, Islamic practices, Islamic institutions, Islamic laws, indeed Islam in its entirety, in the lives of Muslims everywhere. It is an attempt to re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the Islamic human being, guided by the Quran and the Sunnah.

There is perhaps a need at this point to explain why the term ‘resurgence’ is used, and not ‘re-assertion’ or ‘revivalism’ which are also in vogue. Resurgence, which the dictionary defines as ‘the act of rising again’, has a number of strong points. First, it is in a sense a view from within, a way in which many Muslims themselves see the growing impact of the religion among its adherents. It conveys the impression that Islam is becoming important again, that it is regaining its prestige and self-respect. Second, ‘rising again’ suggests a phenomenon which has happened before. There is a hint that there are elements in the present rise of Islam which are linked to the past. And indeed, the past glory of Islam—the cherished path trodden by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions—exerts considerable influence upon the thinking of those who are committed to the ‘Islamic way of life’ today. Third, resurgence as a term embodies the notion of a challenge, even a threat to those who adhere to other world-views. Many Muslims themselves would regard the espousal of an Islamic alternative as a challenge to the dominant social systems. Groups outside Islam, including those who are being challenged, would similarly perceive the rise of Islam as a threat to the positions they hold. For that reason, resurgence reflects the actual reality of perceptions on both sides.

‘Islamic re-assertion’ terminologically speaking, has many of the same advantages. However, it does not convey the idea of a challenge to existing social arrangements. It does not even come close to suggesting that dominant paradigms are being questioned. It merely connotes insistence, insistence upon one’s cause, one’s position. It is
essentially a positive statement, a declaration. But the Islamic move­ment is more than that.

Revivalism, on the other hand, brings out clearly the idea of returning to the past. But it also suggests a desire to revive what is antiquated. While this may be true of certain segments of the Islamic movement, it certainly does not represent the outlook of the move­ment as a whole, which would insist that its emphasis upon the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of the prophet) is merely loyalty to perennial, eternal values. For all these reasons, then, the term 'Islamic resurgence' is preferred.

Manifestations

The signs of Islamic resurgence are everywhere. The rapid diffusion of what is regarded as Islamic attire among a significant segment of the Muslim female population in urban areas in particular is but the most obvious of these signs. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that a good 60 to 70 per cent of all adult Muslim females wear such apparel. A number of Muslim males, too, put on what they perceive to be religiously sanctioned attire. Many of them also grow beards as their way of emulating the Prophet and his companions.

With this change in dress form, there has also been a decline in social communication between the sexes. Muslim males and females who claim to be conforming to an Islamic way of life often operate in separate spheres of activity. Women who are part of the resurgence have far less significant public roles compared to their male counter­parts.

Clothing and male-female roles and relationships apart, Islamic resurgence is also expressing itself in other little ways like the penchant for what is popularly accepted as the Islamic form of greeting. Islamic, in effect Arabic, terminology frills the speeches of the resurgents. Even in their ordinary conversations there is a sprinkling of Arabic words. At the same time, there is much more overt concern about Muslim dietary rules. It is not just a question of avoiding pork, which is specifically prohibited in the Quran, or slaughtering animals in the manner prescribed by the religion. There is now a great deal of sensitivity about whether gelatin is used in chocolates, cakes or tomato sauce. This sensitivity also extends to medicines allegedly manufactured from substances derived indi­rectly from the pig. Resurgents would also be very wary about
eating in the homes of their non-Muslim friends, even when all the
conventional Muslim dietary rules have been taken into account.
Consequently, there has been a noticeable decline in inter-religious
socializing of that kind. This is also why there is much more insist­
ence today on authentic signboards in restaurants and shops distin­
quishing food that is permitted (halal) from food that is prohibited
(haram).

While food is an outstanding example of how attitudes are being
shaped by Islamic resurgence, there are other instances too of how
hobbies, tastes and even values are slowly being moulded by this
new attachment to the religion. As a case in point, female resurgents
would deem it wrong to involve themselves in outdoor games, especially if they have to wear the usual sporting gear, which is
regarded as 'un-Islamic'. They would rather that Muslim women
developed home-based hobbies and pastimes which are linked to
their domestic chores. Similarly, among young Muslims who have
answered the call of Islam, so to speak, Western pop music, West­
ern dances, Western drama and even Western films would be
regarded as decadent indulgences and would be held in contempt and
disgust. It explains to some extent why cultural activities, especially
in universities and colleges, are now being re-defined by students
themselves to emphasize the less frivolous, the less superficial
aspects of life as they see them. Thus, early morning religious
lectures, talks and forums on Islamic themes are given considerable
prominence in their cultural programmes.

As part of this change, cassette tapes and a whole variety of
publications dealing with Islam have become very popular not only
with young Muslims but also the older members of the community.
In Muslim bookstores and little roadside stalls in both small towns
and big cities, tapes and booklets which discuss personal morality,
religious rituals, duties to God, the Day of Judgement and the Here­
after are making brisk business. Some explicitly political tapes are
also selling well.

Indeed, rising Islamic consciousness has, in a sense, created an
enclave of Muslim businesses within the larger economy. Though
still insignificant in terms of the total system, they are becoming
more and more visible in urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, the
federal capital. Tapes and publications aside, the food business is a
flourishing element in this economic set-up. There are now even
serious efforts to manufacture various food products directed to­
wards a Muslim clientele conscious of the importance of halal food.
More than all these signs of resurgence are certain other changes which are not that apparent, mainly because they are not in the public view. Muslims as a whole, especially those in their twenties and thirties, studying and working in Kuala Lumpur and other places, are much more serious about their daily prayers, says a Muslim political leader. In fact, it is because the young perform their prayers faithfully that their parents in some instances begin to follow suit, he argues. The strict adherence to religious duties is not confined to prayers; fasting in the month of Ramadhan, paying zakat (Islamic tax) and performing the haj have all assumed greater significance in the life of the ordinary Muslim.

So far we have looked at various manifestations of resurgence which are basically related to the individual and his perception of his responsibilities towards Islam. This is obvious in the case of attire and food and even in a person's involvement in business and culture. However, Islamic resurgents also want a new social order, as we have already observed. In the last few years, countless seminars and forums have called for the establishment of an Islamic education system, an Islamic economy, an Islamic political order, an Islamic legal framework. Most of all, the resurgents want an Islamic State to be created. It is this demand that is getting stronger and stronger by the day. The passion behind it, fortified by the enthusiastic support of a growing number of young adherents, is an unmistakable sign of our times.

The State has been responding to Islamic resurgence. By so doing, the State—specifically, the government—becomes part of Islamic resurgence. Government-initiated activities on behalf of Islam are also, therefore, among the manifestations of the resurgence. In the early 1970s, when the first signs of growing Islamic consciousness, especially among urban middle-class youth, were becoming apparent, the Government decided to introduce the azan, the call to prayer, over the State-run radio and television service. Since then, a series of new programmes over both media, aimed mainly at educating Muslims and non-Muslims alike in the pristine ideals of the religion, have become part of the weekly fare.

From the mid-1970s onwards, political leaders in the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the leading political party in the inter-ethnic coalition that rules Malaysia called the Barisan Nasional, began to give a lot of emphasis to Islam in their communication with the Malay (Muslim) segment of the populace. Invariably, most of them dwell upon two related themes: one is how
much the UMNO-led Government has done for Islam, and the other the danger of religious extremism in a multi-religious society, and therefore the importance of supporting the Government’s own supposedly moderate approach to Islam. In a sense, by constantly harping upon its own contributions towards Islam, the UMNO leadership has made the people more cognizant of the fact that there is a resurgence. This, in a rather vicarious way, has reinforced Islamic resurgence itself.

If anything, with the introduction of its Islamization programme in 1982, the Islamic tone of the Government has become more pronounced. Essentially a response to the ever expanding strength of Islamic resurgence within the Malay middle class, the programme seeks to inculcate Islamic values in Muslims and to establish various Islamic institutions.

What these values and institutions are we shall discuss later when we examine the ideological approaches of various groups which are part of Islamic resurgence. For the time being, it suffices to note that the Islamization programme, because it is undertaken by the State, has made Islamic resurgence the focus of attention. What this means is that if in the past one could afford to ignore the demand of some Muslim group outside the Establishment for the creation of an Islamic education system, the same issue has to be taken more seriously now, since the State itself has decided to set up an Islamic university. Similarly, scant attention was given in the past to pleas to Islamize the economy since those who espoused that goal were not in control of the levers of State power. However, when the Government itself establishes an Islamic bank, the question of whether the character of the entire economy will be changed in the long run becomes a matter of paramount concern to everyone.

Thus, Islamic resurgence, the State’s response to it, the effect which that has on increasing the impact of resurgence, the State’s further reaction and the unintended impetus it again provides to resurgence have now developed into a dialectical relationship of sorts which has, on the whole, made Islamic resurgence more pervasive and more enduring.

**Antecedents**

Our description of the manifestations of Islamic resurgence should not, however, create the impression that Islamic consciousness and