



IDSS COMMENTARIES (53/2004)

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ISLAM HADHARI: Abdullah's vision for Malaysia?

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26 October 2004

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi spelt out his vision of Islam Hadhari or Civilisational Islam in his speech to the UMNO General Assembly on 23 Sept 04. Significantly, he put this in the context of the Malay community's struggle for independence and development, with an emphasis on enhancing the quality of life. This would be achieved through the acquisition of knowledge, the development of the individual and the nation and the establishment of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system. Such a balanced development would produce an *ummah* or community of knowledgeable and pious people with noble values like honesty and trustworthiness, and who would be able to take on global challenges.

Islam Hadhari, as Prime Minister Abdullah saw it, would aim to achieve ten principles, ranging from faith and piety in God and a just and trustworthy government to the protection of the rights of minority groups and women, the need for strong defences and a balanced development. Being pro-development, Islam Hadhari, PM Abdullah said, would be capable of building up Malay competitiveness as well. To this end, he urged the Malays to use the glorious heritage of Islamic civilisation in all aspects to inspire them to achieve prosperity.

Not Just Good Governance

While Islam Hadhari may appear to the layman a code for good governance and the tenets of a progressive society dressed in Islamic terms, a closer scrutiny of what PM Abdullah said would reveal that his concept goes beyond the idea of good, clean and competent governance. It could well be a paradigm of how Malaysian Muslims should see Islam in the context of a multi-racial Malaysia facing a changing world. Considering the sensitivity of the non-Muslim community towards the increasing 'Islamisation' of Malaysia, PM Abdullah seemed to want to reassure them by emphasising his vision for Malaysian Muslims to focus more on Islamic values as well as personal and economic development rather than on the notion of an Islamic state. Not only does his pronouncement of Islam Hadhari seek to ease non-Muslim anxiety and maintain their support for the national ruling coalition, the *Barisan Nasional*, PM Abdullah's message was clearly also targeted at his Muslim constituents. They were assured that Islam Hadhari was neither a new religion nor a new *mazhab* (denomination), but an effort to bring the Ummah (Islamic community) back to the fundamentals of the Quran and the Hadith – the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad -- which formed the foundation of Islamic civilisation.

From one perspective, Islam Hadhari could be seen as an extension of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's policy of '*penerapan nilai-nilai Islam*' (inculcation of Islamic values). But from another, it could also be interpreted as a reaction to PAS' blueprint for *Negara Islam* (Islamic state), launched before the last general election. Muslim scholars say it is difficult to fault the concept of Islam Hadhari as propounded by PM Abdullah from the theological point of view. Indeed many Islamists would see the premier as having co-opted their rhetoric. However the Islamists could still point to two main issues that remained unclear: How Islam Hadhari can help establish Malaysia as an Islamic state and how it can facilitate the implementation of Syariah or Islamic law as the law of the country.

PAS, in particular, can be expected to continue dismissing the government's effort to implement Islam Hadhari as mere lip service by pointing to the prevailing corruption in government and society -- even the culture of money politics in UMNO itself. UMNO leaders, however, could argue that PAS should not harp on the Islamic state as an issue because the former premier, Dr Mahathir, had already declared Malaysia an Islamic state on 29 Sept 2001 and thus Islam Hadhari should be seen as a description of the kind of Islamic state that UMNO was striving for. As for the Syariah, PM Abdullah did refer to "*Maqasid Syariah*" (Syariah Objectives) which are to safeguard and empower religion as well as to dignify the intellect, life and property. All these could provide the basis for more Islamic laws in future should there be wider acceptance by all Malaysians. Although popular acceptance of Islamic law might sound far-fetched at this point, particularly from the perspective of Malaysia's substantial non-Muslim population, the prospects for this materialising over the long term should however not be dismissed entirely. The country's demography is shifting in favour of Malaysia's Muslim community. This could increase the number of 'Islamists' within the ranks of UMNO and further intensify Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. In the more immediate future however, PM Abdullah's Islam Hadhari concept works primarily to counter the agenda of the opposition Islamic party, PAS, to introduce "*Hudud*" (Islamic criminal law) by stating that Hudud punishment cannot be implemented at the expense of *Maqasid Syariah*, or at the risk of undermining those objectives.

Those who have been following the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia will acknowledge that long before PM Abdullah delivered his speech on Islam Hadhari, many of the ideas had already been presented by various Islamic groups, such as the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM) and Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM). Many *ustaz* or clerics have also been recruited into UMNO over the years. Thus PM Abdullah's Islamic Hadhari concept may read more like a syncretic restatement of what had been voiced by Islamic groups in the past 25 years than an altogether new idea.

While PM Abdullah's speech provides a good foundation for the principles of Islam Hadhari, more elaboration and explanation may be required on certain issues, for example what is meant by the concept of a balanced development -- what constitutes the balance between "*fardu ain*" (individual obligation) and "*fardu kifayah*" (collective obligation). Nevertheless the concept of Islam Hadhari as he had enunciated is significant in two ways. Firstly, it provides a benchmark for people to assess, evaluate or scrutinise current practices as well as a reference point for reform. Secondly, it provides a future direction for the ruling party and government. In years to come, his 23 Sept UMNO speech will be used to gauge Prime Minister Abdullah's tenure in office, and in particular the success, or failure, of his drive to implement Islam Hadhari.

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