



By Fabio Scarpello

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (24 Nov 2009) - As a country often referred to as an example of a moderate Muslim-majority state in the region, Malaysia has been raising eyebrows worldwide lately.

A string of incidents has recently underlined tensions between the Muslim majority and the Christian and Hindu minorities, and otherwise painted the country with more Islamic colors. These have included Muslims protesting against Hindu temples by parading in front of one carrying a cow's head; fathers converting their children to Islam without informing the mother; housewives sentenced to whippings for daring to drink a beer; and pop concerts being banned.

But more worrisome is the level of Islamization in the nation's bureaucracy, which has taken on a life of its own and seems accountable to no one. Each of the 13 states in Malaysia now has its own Islamic administration and jurisdiction.

The case of respected cleric Asri Zainul Abidin has brought the problem to the fore, pushing the issue onto the national agenda. In so doing, it has opened the door to potentially significant ripple effects for Malaysia's political and religious future.

On Nov 18, [Asri was charged](#) in the Selangor Sharia Court with teaching without a permit. He pleaded not guilty, but if convicted, he could be imprisoned for up to two years.

The scholar was briefly arrested at the beginning of November, when 35 members of the Selangor Islamic Administration led some 20 police officers in storming the private house where he was giving a lecture.

The teaching permit is required in several states of the Malaysian federation to avoid the spreading of heretical Islamic sects. It is, nonetheless, rarely imposed on those who have well-known, mainstream Islamic credentials.

Asri, who has a doctorate in religious studies and was the highest religious authority in the state of Perlis until recently, certainly qualifies as far as his credentials go. But his view of Islam as a religion that needs to be seen through a modern lens remains controversial.

In the last few years, he has not hesitated to speak out on a number of sensitive issues. He has argued that there should be no punishment for apostasy, and that Islamic authorities have no right to conduct raids on hotel rooms looking for unmarried Muslim couples. He has also defended the right of non-Muslims to use "Allah" as a translation for "God" in Bibles and other non-Muslim texts, and called for teaching all children interfaith lessons at school.

These views are seen as a threat by the Islamic bureaucracy and intelligentsia, which have successfully marginalized alternative voices in the last two decades. Hence, their mob-like attack on the scholar.

Asri's arrest was supported by the National Ulama Organization, the Sharia Lawyers Association of Malaysia, and a plethora of ultra-conservative NGOs. This same informal coalition had last month opposed his nomination to lead the Islamic Da'wah Foundation of Malaysia, a high-profile, government-sponsored Islamic missionary organization.

Moderate academics, non-partisan NGOs, civil society groups and religious minorities have long voiced concerns over the growing power of the religious apparatus. But over the last two decades, these concerns were overshadowed by the larger political battle -- between the governing United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) -- for the country's Muslim vote, which accounts for 40 percent of its 26 million people.

Today, though, the political landscape has changed. Islam is no longer the sole political commodity available, and both PAS and UMNO have shown signs of opening up toward a more inclusive political platform.

PAS has opened its ranks to non-Muslims. And although UMNO faces internal divisions, with one faction calling for further Islamization, it has begun to consider softening the affirmative action policies that, since the 1970s, have given the ethnic Malays a privileged position in government, education and the bureaucracy.

The Malaysian constitution states that Malays must be Muslim, inextricably linking the religious issue to that of ethnic relations in a country where millions of ethnic Indians and Chinese feel less than equal.

Asri, who is very popular among the young, has previously been courted by both the UMNO and PAS, and both parties have expressed their support for his cause. Both Prime Minister Najib Razak and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim have made public statements of support, as

have many NGOs, academics and civil society groups. The case has also been relentlessly reported by the national media, with a clear bias in favor of the cleric.

With such popular and political support, it is unlikely that Asri will be convicted for a crime that contradicts the constitution's secular right of freedom of speech. In fact, it is quite possible that the ordeal will convince him to enter politics, bringing his erudite, progressive view into that public arena.

Moreover, Asri's plight could push the political establishment further, toward confronting a despotic Islamic bureaucracy that no longer serves the interests of a modern, multi-ethnic Malaysia as it struggles to attract the foreign investment needed to continue its progress.

If not, the country once known for its moderate form of Islam might instead continue to make headlines for cows' head protests, beer whippings and banned pop concerts.

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