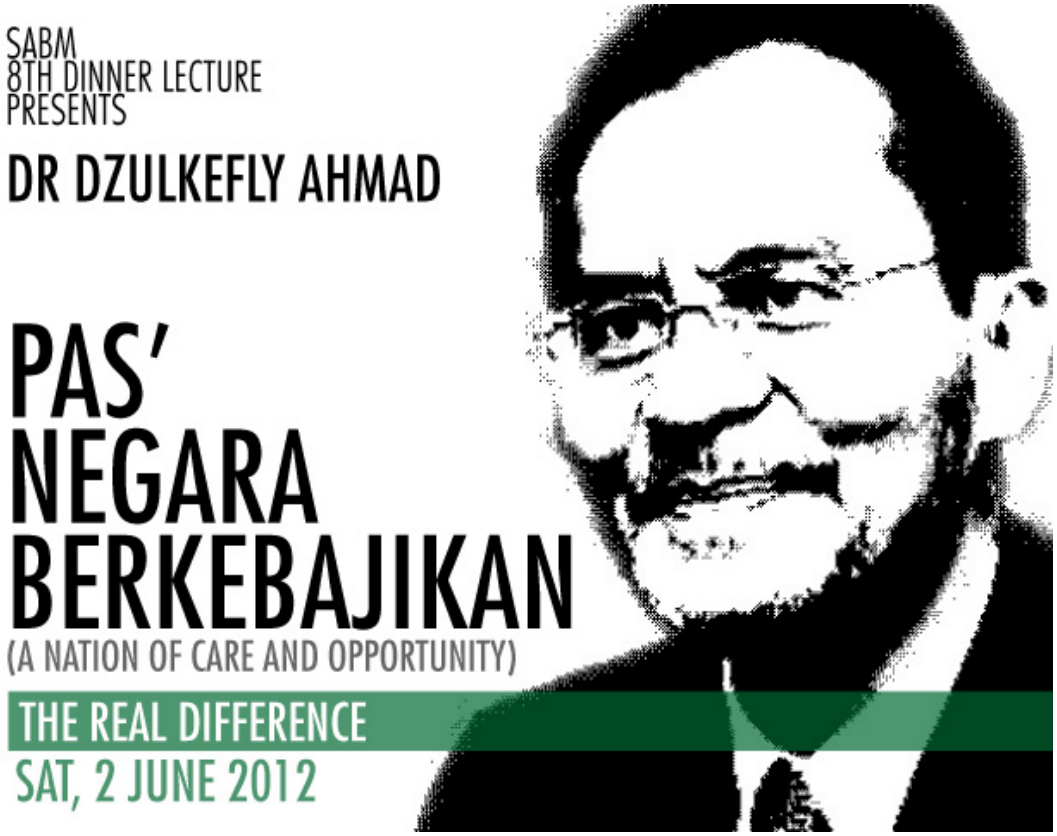

By Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad

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JUNE 9 — I have never feared to engage in any intellectual discourse or even in any hostile debate. But admittedly I had a bout of anxiety when invited to speak on PAS's "Negara Berkebajikan" at the 8th Dinner Talk on June 2 organised by Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia (SABM).

It isn’t because I’m unfamiliar to SABM. Indeed, it’s quite the contrary. Yes, SABM’s constituency isn’t my usual kind of audience perhaps. But I have engaged even more inimical participants, both locally and abroad, talking on acrimonious issues under the rubric of “political Islam”.

Frankly, it’s the subject matter of “Negara Berkebajikan” or now translated as “Nation of Care and Opportunity” or in brief a “Benevolent Nation” that was causing the anxiety. It was my maiden speech of sorts on this topic. I couldn’t really fathom the kind of response my talk would elicit.

Are they seriously in wanting to know more of this new advocacy of PAS, I thought to myself? Or will they simply shoot at me again on the topics of hudud or apostasy, with little interest for the subject of a “Benevolent State”?

Besides, how could I expound and articulate the subject without being perceived as “proselytising on Islam”. Should I talk off the cuff or deliver an academic lecture that might bore the audience to slumber?

Consequently, I started the talk by breaking ground rule No. 1 on public speaking i.e. with an apology. I told the audience that I was honestly undecided as to how I was to pitch this talk. My quick handshaking around earlier gave me a grasp of the profile of the audience.

As I told them that I was not about to be "proselytising on Islam", I deflected the seriousness of the introduction by an ice-breaker, saying that I was not here to run down the BN government because they have already ran themselves down enough.

With their laughter to greet me, I quickly set into motion my talk that enabled me to give a brief snapshot of the "dire state of the nation". With seven grim scenarios of the nation — from the gross fiscal mismanagement of a rich country ending with very many poor people, to the deepening of the racial and religious divide of late — the audience was "primed" to accept the fact that our beloved nation is in dire straits.

It's a kind of "ABU" syndrome setting in; a typical symptom of despair and despondency uniquely Malaysian. Lest you're still unaware, it's dubbed "Anything But Umno" or also incidentally in Bahasa "Asal Bukan Umno" therapy. Surely, as I emphatically said, the task of redeeming a nation beset with such predicaments wouldn't be an easy feat.

But why PAS’s “Benevolent Nation” as a solution? Foremost in their minds was what has happened to PAS’s Islamic state? Anticipating the question that has preoccupied the minds of many, not least because it has been demonised by PAS’s political nemesis Umno, I had to carefully debunk all apprehension.

Umno is in fact accusing PAS of not only deconstructing the Islamic state but of late, worse still, of Islam, for the sole reason of PAS wanting to achieve federal political power. This has become Umno’s greatest folly of late. Worst still, Umno compounded the attacks with racial overtones and “Islam-under-siege” religious paranoia.

PAS is accused of “selling out” Islam to the DAP, alleging Malay political power would be severely diminished with a “diluted Islam” with PAS’s new “Benevolent State”. To that end, the NGOs Perkasa and JATI came handy.

Against this political backdrop, I was all the more keen to expound on the concept of a Benevolent State to my audience. I was eager to make them understand that PAS’s new image is not only politically-driven or an expediency of a political party into a critical election year.

Indeed PAS, like many of its Islamist counterparts the world over, especially in the Middle-Eastern countries in post Arab-Spring democratisation, is experiencing a “generational shift” in its “democratic” ideological discourse, a new narrative or even “scholarship”, a direct product of an intellectual renewal or “ijtihad” of contemporary Islamist thinkers.

Islamists now understand better on how to engage “democratically” and through the ballot box in a language comprehensible to all. PAS similarly has actually transformed itself into a contemporary Islamist political organisation that exudes understanding of the context and demands of new realities in an emerging “New Politics”.

The concept of a “Benevolent Nation” describes it all. It wasn’t easy to explain all these phenomena to a Malaysian audience with hardly any exposure to “Political Islam”, much less to appreciate “Islamists” experiencing a “shift” of sorts. Perhaps you now understand my earlier anxiety.

But my predicament was quite easily overcome when I decided to throw back the question at them. “Why do you, as believers of other faiths and ideological convictions, hate so much the idea of an Islamic state”? The anticipated answers came spontaneously from the audience almost spot-on.

Among their commonest angst of an Islamic state were syariah will be enforced, hudud will be applied on all, people of other faiths will be made into second-class citizens or "zimmi" (read the conquered) and, worst of it all, they felt alienated.

Empathising with their grouses, I wasted no time in expounding the concept of the "Nation of Care and Opportunity" for almost an hour, intermittently posing questions at the audience so as to break the monotony of an "academic lecture".

Lest I have deluded myself to believe that I have given a speech worthy of a "dinner talk", permit me to quote a few lines of emails I received from the organiser the very same night and from a Christian leader participant.

On behalf of the SABM Core Group, I would like to thank you for making the Dinner Lecture a memorable learning experience.

Your exposition of the "Nation Of Care and Opportunity" philosophy and perspectives on national issues was excellent.

The presentation was very well received. The feedback from the largely urban middle class

audience was very positive. Many were delighted to have met you in person.

Thanks a million for the seamless way you handled the tough questions.

And another from A Christian Leader:

"Thank you very much for the succinct and clear exposition of the current position of PAS which you gave at the SABM dinner and talk on Saturday night 2 June 2012.

I am very glad to note that PAS looks to the welfare of all Malaysians by being a blessing to all others. Truly this is the "PAS for all" tagline which I once saw on a banner in the 2008 elections in Taman Sri Muda in Shah Alam but today is better articulated and elaborated in the PAS booklet "Nation of Care and Opportunity" … signed Tan Kong Beng, A Christian leader.

Permit me to pen down a summary of the salient highlights.

PAS's "Nation Of Care and Opportunity" is a "national proposition" to redeem a nation that has been severely compromised by leaders who did not actually place the citizenry as the ultimate

stakeholders but whose mandate they shamelessly got in every election.

PAS’s “Benevolent State” provides for both “equitable opportunity for all” while catering for the special needs of the disadvantaged groups based on need and not race, religious or even political affiliation in providing for “enablers” and care to empower people to realise their true potential.

PAS’s “Caring Nation” is surely not identical to the Nordic model of a welfare state in Sweden or Norway that hinges on a “redistribution taxation system” although similar in providing for essential services like education, health and transportation as to keep cost of living manageable and ensuring the citizenry have a decent quality of life.

It emphasises fair opportunity for wealth creation as much as it ensures equitable redistribution, thus empowering the rakyat to enhance their disposable income.

It stresses on the non-governmental sectors assuming their role in society as being equally a moral and religious duty. Endowment institutions by non-governmental organisations and business community will flourish to provide services and care as witnessed in past Islamist civilisations and even contemporary Muslim affluent societies.

Most critically, PAS’s “Benevolent State” places “leaders as custodians” and not as usurpers of power in embodying the Quranic concept of “Vicegerent of God on Earth” or “KhalifatulLah fil Ard”. Hence the timeless principles of integrity, transparency and accountability are very much a religious imperative of all Islamists when mandated, alone or in a coalition, by the electorate to serve the rakyat.

This forms the bedrock of a good governance in a “Benevolent State” for all Islamists, to unrelentingly establish justice, fairness and prosperity for all.

PAS is no exception and this surely is a “new PAS”.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

SABM will upload excerpts of Dr Dzul's talk at the Dinner Lecture on YouTube in due time.