



*By Karim Raslan*

*First published in [TheStarOnline](#)*

LAST week I received a call from an old friend. She was agitated because her daughter had decided to apply for permanent residency abroad.

I can still remember the call. She had started talking almost as soon as I answered the phone:

“Karim, I can’t stop her this time. She’s old enough to sign all the forms for herself. I’m upset, but there’s nothing I can do. She is adamant, she says things are only getting worse and that there’s no future for her here.”

What the mother didn’t say – but I could sense from her tone – was the fact that she no longer had the confidence or courage to persuade her daughter otherwise.

She in effect had agreed with her daughter’s choice.

And given the events of the past few months, can anyone blame them?

Moreover, unlike in the late 90s when I found myself fielding countless calls from non-Malay friends talking about emigration, this was one of the first from a Malay counterpart – someone from the Bumiputera middle class who’d benefited enormously over the past few decades from the Government’s largesse.

I should add that those with daughters appeared to be the most concerned.

However, a slew of landmark cases have rattled the Malay middle class.

The list is long – the part-time model Kartika's impending caning for drinking a beer, the bizarre decision (which was subsequently reversed) to bar Muslims from an upcoming Black Eyed Peas concert, and the demonstration over a temple relocation in Shah Alam are just a handful.

With each incident, the lines between private and public morality, race and religion have become increasingly blurred and, indeed, hotly contested.

As we settle into the *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* festivities – spending time with friends and families, it's clear that many are beginning to feel a sense of deep discomfort with the mounting tensions within the Malay community.

To my mind, the biggest losers in all this are the Malays themselves or rather ourselves.

As politicians seek to stake a claim to the Malay vote, they define the community in ever narrower and more exclusive terms – a series of dead-ends where your Malay-ness bars you from doing different things and being different.

Furthermore, the politicisation of Malay identity – the basis of political power in Malaysia – means that all Malays, whether or not they're directly involved in politics are feeling the "heat".

At the same time, Umno's insistence on attacking Pakatan Rakyat on this terrain (hence relinquishing the multiracial ground to the Opposition, it would seem) has left many middle class, professional Malays feeling increasingly exposed and uncomfortable.

For them (and that includes myself) the broader, more cosmopolitan multiracial appeals – such as the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's 1Malaysia – allow for a greater degree of flexibility in terms of lifestyle and personal choice.

To be frank, the Malay middle class has been complicit in this situation.

Over the past decades most have drifted away from active engagement in politics.

In short, we've always thought that politics is too dirty and corrupt for us – that public service is something that those who can't get good jobs spend their time doing.

Instead, we live our lives totally separate and apart from party politics – rarely meeting with Umno, PAS or PKR activists.

We've been more focused on our families and our careers. This has allowed others to set the agenda politically.

Nonetheless, we've started to view Umno with alarm, seeing party members as rowdy, corrupt,

ill-disciplined and greedy.

We also worry at the current unrepentant tone and the way “winning at all costs” has supplanted any other higher aspirations.

At the same time PAS’ antics in Selangor in particular remind us of what the Ullama-led party is capable of when the opportunity arises.

The constant pressure to take the moral high ground, neglecting more serious governance and social issues, reveals the conservative faction of PAS’ narrow-minded bigotry at its very worst.

So where does that leave the Malay middle class?

Well we’re nowhere. We are lost and we are without a voice.

There is no doubt that we want PAS' uncompromising attitude to corruption.

Indeed, there are moments when we can't help thinking that maybe – just maybe – syariah penalties would be a good deterrent for high-level, white-collar crime?

Moreover, we admire PAS' commitment to openness and transparency. At the same time the party seems to be manned by so many clever and well-educated professionals.

However, when it comes to social and moral issues (as in Selangor) the party's stance is worryingly extreme and at times downright frightening.

The Malay middle class is caught in a no-win situation.

We desperately want Umno to clean up its act, to reform and repent, but this seems increasingly unlikely.

At the same time Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has all but disappeared from view and PAS is seeking to dominate Pakatan's social policies.

Is it any wonder that some Malays – some of the best and brightest – are starting to vote with their feet?