No place for disruptive ethnocentric politics

by Ameen Kamal

There is no moral basis for accentuating the trend of ethnic polarisation and divisive identity politics capitalising on race and religion. Racism isn't supported by Islamic teachings, value-based leadership and even science.

In addition to Malaysia's historical context, the fact that Malays make up more than 60 percent of the population by race and Muslims make up 61 percent of the population by religious beliefs provide the demographic basis for Malay rights, leadership and the protection of the Islamic faith.

However, this is not an excuse for discriminatory and polarising racial and religious rhetoric.

Capitalising on the traditional collective memory of the romantic past, identity insecurities and demographic nature at the expense of others and using race and religion to push for personal interest and political gains are wrong.

It has to be made clear that Islam is against racism, chauvinisms or religious extremism. The Almighty declares in the Holy Quran "O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you (49:13)".

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported in an authentic Hadith (narration) to have said “There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a non-Arab over an Arab, and no superiority of a white person over a black person or of a black person over a white person, except on the basis of personal piety and righteousness.”

The two undisputed sources for the Islamic perspective on the matter provide clear confirmation on racial equality, and that the true measure of one’s superiority over another is one’s spiritual and moral standing.

Therefore, as far as political morality goes, it is clear that sowing hatred, promoting distrust and discord, injustice, corruption, blind pursuit of worldly desires and extravagance (especially at the expense of others) have gone beyond identity politics and are repugnant to the tenets of Islam.

Any parties claiming to represent the *ummah* or as defenders of Islamic principles must not be plagued with such “diseases”. Can a political party with leaders that are embroiled in court cases, corruption charges and conviction of criminal cases confidently and truthfully make this claim?

Despite some historical grounds to such claims, loyalty and commitment should be to principles and praiseworthy values. Blind loyalty to a particular party that has lost its ways cannot be justified from any moral lens.

In addition to defending Islamic values and principles, Muslim leaders should also ensure that non-Muslim fellow citizens under the administration of Malay leadership are not deprived of their rights.

In Chapter 60 verse 7 to 9 in the Holy Quran, The Almighty ordained “It may be that Allah will grant love (and friendship) between you and those whom you (now) hold as enemies. For Allah has power (over all things); And Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful (60:7)”.

In Verse 8: “Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are

just (60:8)".

In Verse 9: "Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong (60:9)".

Thus, The Almighty ordained that Islam is against racism, chauvinism or ethnic prejudices. In fact, the verses encourage kindness to non-hostile non-Muslims. Unfortunately, under the incumbent polarising identity politics, even non-Malay Muslims could be in a dilemma without proper democratic accommodation of their minority position.

Furthermore, divisive identity politics based on race and religion for the sake of votes is inherently unjust and discriminatory, which goes against the philosophy of effective *da'wah* (the act of inviting and calling people towards the truth, towards God, and towards the teachings of Islam) and goes against the core principle of justice in Islamic leadership.

If anything, such dirty tactics, which sow the seeds of hatred between ethnic and religious groups through polarising rhetoric and discrimination undermine the proper upholding of Islamic teachings, the proper representation (and therefore, dissemination) of Islam, as well as the overall efforts for peaceful co-existence and national unity.

The issue does not only concern Muslims. Racial discrimination also goes against value-based leadership (VBL) which is applicable to all leaders.

For those who do not subscribe to religious and value-based leadership philosophies, hard-line discourse and narratives of chauvinism and racialism are also not supported by science. Human beings are genetically 99.9 percent identical.

American Association of Physical Anthropologist (AAPA) statement of race and racism framed this perfectly when it says “Notably, variants are not distributed across our species in a manner that maps clearly onto socially-recognised racial groups. This is true even for aspects of human variation that we frequently emphasise in discussions of race, such as facial features, skin colour and hair type. No group of people is, or ever has been, biologically homogeneous or 'pure'. Furthermore, human populations are not — and never have been — biologically discrete, truly isolated, or fixed.”

In other words, biologically, we share more traits with one another than we share differences, despite outward appearances. Thus, in the Malaysian context, the term “pure” Malays or “pure” Chinese or “pure” Indians are more of a social construct rooted in culture and geography, rather than a strict biological reality.

In fact, there is genetic genealogical evidence suggesting a common ancestry for all humans, which could be aligned with the “Adam and Eve” central dogma of common human lineage mentioned in Abrahamic religions.

The self-destruction due to divisive identity politics, the failure to uphold the true teachings of Islam and promote internal unity will be the undoing of Malays and Muslims.

Given that this forms the majority of the Malaysian society, its impact will have far-reaching consequences beyond its own sphere, negatively impacting the nation from the social, economic, and political perspective.

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