

INDONESIA/MALAYSIA: Beware the war against ASEAN's atheists

A look at the ongoing persecution of a minority group that continues to be under assault in some parts of the region

By David Hutt

The Diplomat (19.08.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2wFEFnW> – There is one “minority” that knows no borders, isn’t divided by race or gender, and yet still faces persecution across the world: atheists. And in recent weeks, they have been under attack in Malaysia. The government has announced that it will “hunt down” atheists who, it says, could face prosecution – exactly what for remains in question. This all began earlier this month, when the Kuala Lumpur branch of the Atheist Republic, a Canada-based organization, posted a photo of their annual meeting on social media.

The Hunt for Atheists Continues

In response, the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department, Malaysia’s religious watchdog, said it is now “constantly monitoring” atheists groups, presumably those also online, and its director said that they would provide “treatment” to those caught. Shahidan Kassim, a minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, said later that: “I suggest we go all-out to hunt down these groups and we ask the media to help us identify them because this is a religious country.”

Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar upped the ante when he commented that the “the police would scrutinize the existing laws to enable appropriate action to be taken should

the atheist group cause anxiety among Muslims,” as FreeMalaysiaToday, an online newspaper, put it.

One can make many things of this comment. Primarily, though, if a few dozen, mostly young people who gather once a year in private can make Malaysia’s Muslims anxious (note Khalid cared little about the nerves of Malaysian Christians or Buddhists) then isn’t his comment an affront to their commitment to the faith itself?

But the Malaysian authorities took the issue back to a perennial one: apostasy.

According to Malaysia’s federal laws, apostasy is not a crime. But in practice, the country’s state-run courts, which hold the sway over religious matters, rarely allow Muslims to formally leave the faith. Instead they are punished with “counseling,” fines, or jail time. Similarly, atheism is not strictly illegal in Malaysia, but blasphemy is. This makes atheism a grey area, since the most fundamental point of it is the belief that there is no god.

A similar problem exists in Indonesia. In 2012, [Alexander Aan](#) was almost beaten to death by a mob and then sentenced to two and a half years in prison – while his attackers were set free – after he posted a message on Facebook that read: “God doesn’t exist.” The commentary surrounding the case frequently asked whether atheism was illegal in Indonesia or not. Most pundits took the opinion that it wasn’t illegal: Alexander Aan, they said, wasn’t convicted for his atheism but for blasphemy. To some, that was no more than intellectual contortionism at work.

But none of this should have come as a surprise. A 2016 [report](#) by the International Humanist and Ethical Union found Malaysia to be one of the least tolerant countries in the world of atheists. The report singled out Prime Minister Najib Razak for criticism. In May of that year, he described

atheism and secularism, along with liberalism and humanism, as “deviant” and a “threat to Islam and the state.” He stated clearly: “We will not tolerate any demands or right to apostasy by Muslims.”

Over the years I have met a number of Malaysian atheists. Many have to hide their lack of faith from their families, lest they be ostracized. Social media, here, has been a massive help. And many are forced to hide behind less-controversial monikers, like “freethinker,” in order to avoid the thought police. By way of a comparison, I have met Vietnamese pro-democracy activists more willing to criticize the Communist Party in public places than Malaysian atheists willing to talk about religion at coffee shops. “I am worried. I have already accepted that something might happen to me... that I might be killed,” one Malaysian atheist recently told Channel News Asia.

No Freedom From Religion

We are often told that Malaysia and Indonesia are secular nations. That is not quite true. At best, they are secular-lite. Secularism has three main components, and that is often forgotten conveniently by some. The first is a genuine separation of the church – or mosque, or pagoda – and the state. The second is freedom of religion, which brings with it pluralism and religious tolerance. Put simply, all faiths have equal status within the eyes of the state.

Malaysia and Indonesia do to some extent practice these but certainly not the third, which is freedom *from* religion. It means that I, a non-believer, am not interfered with by the forces of religion, and am protected against this by the state. It also means that a believer is allowed, by law, to remove himself from a religion. As has been indicated above, that is not quite the case by any means.

More Than Politics

Some pundits will simply claim that politics is at hand. Malaysian elections are approaching, and Malaysia's ruling party is playing the religious card, fearful that Malay-Muslims will vote for one of the opposition parties. In Indonesia, the arrest and imprisonment of [Basuki "Ahok" Purnama](#) for blasphemy, coming as it did during the Jakarta's mayoral election, was also politicians "using" religion, some say. President Joko Widodo weighed in here with the opinion that the anti-Ahok protests, some of the largest Indonesia has ever witnessed, were "steered by political actors who were exploiting the situation."

There is some merit in this view, but it is far from the whole picture. For starters, if they are "exploiting" conservative religious sentiments, then surely those sentiments themselves must have been there in the first place – and must be thought by a sizeable number of people for opportunistic politicians to take notice. That itself is something that ought not to be ignored, since it is the root cause of the issue we are addressing here.

Second, if it is only politicians exploiting the situation, why haven't the "moderate" Muslim organizations come out and defend the atheists, for instance, or, to take a more specific example, why didn't they campaign for Ahok? As some experts have already noted, Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Indonesian Muslim organization, with more than 50 million followers, made a lot of noise against the radical protestors at the time, but was conspicuously quiet on defending Ahok's right to say what he did.

A More Radical Mainstream?

Some have argued that the extremists in Malaysia and Indonesia are becoming more open. But there is also some evidence that points to the mainstream, or even the public at large, being more conservative. For instance, in 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted a [worldwide survey](#) on the attitudes of

Muslims towards different elements of faith. When Indonesian respondents were asked if they favored making Shari'a the national law of the country, 72 percent said they would – it is currently only the law in the semi-autonomous state of Aceh. Of Malaysian respondents, 86 percent said they would, higher than the percentages recorded in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Egypt, countries which are not typically described as “moderate.”

Some might argue that Muslims were merely responding in such a way because they perceived that doing so was in line with what their religion called for and what it meant to be a good, practicing Muslim. But what was striking was that, of those respondents who favored introducing Shari'a, 41 percent from Malaysia and 50 percent from Indonesia thought it should apply to all citizens, not just Muslims. And 60 percent from Malaysia and 48 percent from Indonesia thought stoning to death was an appropriate penalty for adultery.

One can quibble with any single poll or statistic or development. But the point here is that there are enough of each of these out there for a level of concern to be raised. Or, at the very least, for more attention to be paid to a relatively neglected issue.

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