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Yoga fatwa reflects urban concerns

*Conservative parties find it increasingly difficult
to make inroads among urban, educated Malays*

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The initiative taken by the National Fatwa Council last week to forbid Malaysian Muslims from practising yoga reflects an increasing worry among conservative clerics whose claim to power relies on a prerogative to define right from wrong for the Malay community.

This community, however, is becoming more and more diverse by the day. The young are becoming more numerous and better educated, and a larger proportion of them now live in cities.

As was evident in the general elections earlier this year when a surprising large proportion of Malays in the urbanized areas of the peninsula voted for the opposition, support for multiracial and pluralistic values is on the rise.

This has shaken not only the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), but also religious leaders, who correctly sense that an eroding of their credibility and relevance in urban areas is underway.

Even within the victorious Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), which as one of three opposition parties, managed to secure control over its home base of Kelantan and, for the first time, over Kedah as well, signs of discomfort were quickly seen when some of its leaders agreed to meet Umno leaders to discuss possible cooperation over what they saw as a serious split in the Malay vote.

Both these parties depend heavily on the rural Malay vote, and with the urban Malay vote growing more important by the day and being much less likely to be religiously conservative at the same time, the steadily increasing divide within the Malay community can no longer be ignored.

Both Umno and PAS, knowing that their ability to make new inroads among urban Malays is limited, may therefore be expected to raise issues that reflect the growing difference in the daily concerns between Malays living in cities and those living in rural settings.

PAS, in itself, does not seem to fancy itself as an urban party and its ambitions may not in the foreseeable future stretch beyond it exercising a strong influence in rural areas.

Umno, on the other hand, is more schizophrenic. It sees itself as a party of development, but its voter base is increasingly less urban.

According to unofficial figures, there may be as many as four million urban Malays who have not registered to vote. Should most of these decide any time soon to do what it takes to exercise their right to vote, the politics of Malaysia will change dramatically.

With escalating urbanisation and an increasingly younger Malay population, the trend is moving in favour of a new and more flexible and nominally multiracial party such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and against Umno and PAS.

PKR's impressive jump earlier this year from having only one seat in Parliament to becoming the country's major opposition party with 31 seats suggests that this trend is moving at a faster pace than has been assumed.

If it plays its cards right, PKR seems destined to be the future party of choice for young urban Malays wishing to escape the omnipresence of ethnocentric politics.

This development is a difficult one for both Umno and PAS to swallow. As the power balance within the Malay community now looks, PAS and Umno are increasingly contesting for a common constituency — the rural Malay vote on the peninsula.

There are therefore strong reasons for conservatives within Umno and PAS to feel increasing unease over their inability to appeal to young urbanites.

The fact that the Malay community is growing much faster than the others, and is consequently getting younger suggests that the concerns of young urbanite Malays of both sexes will configure the political issues of the future.

This translates into a contestation over lifestyle — urban existence versus rural values. Not only does the unavoidability of cosmopolitan influences in a modern urban setting challenge traditional ways of thought and relations of power, it naturally undermines past and present terms of cohesion such as ethnicity and religion.

Fighting what seems a losing battle, religious and racial conservatives seek to reverse behaviour patterns that they do not understand but that are highly meaningful to an urbanite struggling with the stress of work and family, and the fear of urban isolation and alienation, and staying in touch with global changes.

And so, we have fatwas proclaimed by religious authorities, often silently condoned by political authorities, against tomboy behaviour, heavy rock music, and the practice of yoga among Muslims.

What we have is a mighty clash between traditional values, vested interests, old power structures on one side, and the urbanite's more individualistic solutions to modern pressures and psychological strain on the other.

It is true that these fatwas do not immediately concern non-Muslims. However, should urban Malays as a new constituency fail to articulate a political or spiritual defence for their necessarily evolving and adaptive behaviour, then the risk is great that unchecked parochialism will reverse the economic future of the whole country, and destroy the role it has to play on the world stage as a voice of moderation.

Seen this way, Malaysia's situation is not unlike that of many other comparable countries. Urbanisation brings unavoidable and radical change in lifestyle, which leads to an unavoidable confrontation with traditional forces. The paradigm of race and religion clouds this universal modern phenomenon.

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