

# **RSOG Seminar**

## **How Religion Impacts Multicultural Society**

with

**Dina Zaman**

**When** : 12 November 2015  
**Where** : Razak School of Government  
**Speakers** : Dina Zaman

### **About the Seminar**

If one searches for images of any society, the majority of them appear as a group of people holding each other's hand. Not only that, the images are often colourful. Corporations, organisations, and even countries are gradually branding themselves as diverse. Diversity is fast being positioned as source of strength to a society-heterogeneity of ideas, views etc. Nonetheless, as once pointed by Oscar Wilde "society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world there are only individuals." People are generally shaped by their upbringing, education, past experiences, and religious beliefs. Whilst religious beliefs can be common in many respects, the emphasis on certain practices or rituals may be different, geographically, socially, and based on subgroups or sects that they are aligned to. This seminar intends to explore how religion impacts a multicultural society like Malaysia. What are the patterns or trends observed in this country? Is it similar to other parts of the world? If there is a difference, why? What can policymakers learn from this observation to ensure better policymaking for a multicultural Malaysia?

### **Summary**

Malaysia is a multicultural society, home to diverse communities and religions – Malays, Chinese, Indians with different religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others. Multicultural societies are often seen as more prone to conflicts and tensions as they are assumed to be much more fragile than other social fabrics that are more homogenous and alike. However, this is not to dispute that there are many cases in history where very diverse societies have been successful in living together

side by side in a pluralistic society, without the conflicts and the tensions that is often assumed. With a population of over 30 million, diverse cultures and background, there are bound to be some discrepancies and differences among the different ethnic groups and religions in how we deal with our everyday lives. The challenge to remain harmonious and united as one heterogeneous society is an ongoing battle for every diverse nation. When looking at societies and their make-up, proponents of multiculturalism often come up with different metaphors such as melting pots, salad bowls, and kaleidoscopes to describe the social fabric of the society. Melting pots, for instance, often refer to heterogeneous societies becoming more homogenous; as the different elements of many cultures melt into one more dominant culture. Pluralistic societies, on the other hand, is argued by Furnival as societies where different groups exist together without absorbing the elements of the other cultures.

Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Abdul Rahman Embong once argued that Malaysia is neither a melting pot nor is it a pluralistic society of the Furnivallian type. Unlike some nations where other cultures assimilate into a bigger and more dominant culture, Malaysians remain unique with our own identities and cultures, while some, 'jealously guard their cultures and religions.' Needless to say, Malaysia is often seen as a good example of a relatively successful multi-ethnic society. Nevertheless, recent trends have also caused concern for many in the country. The call for segregation of trolleys for non-halal products, the issue of monitoring of dress codes at government offices, the proposed adoption of hudud, and the usage of Allah by non-Muslims are becoming the everyday topic of the average Malaysians. Some have argued that this is a growing trend of deepening Islamization in the country by extreme, conservative Islamic and ultra nationalist groups which is encroaching the lives and private spheres of the non-Muslims in the country.

Polls that were conducted by the Merdeka Centre for instance, further emphasized the trend of growing religious fervour among many Muslims in the country. In a poll that was conducted in 2005, 60% of Malays for instance described themselves as being Muslims first instead of Malays first, as opposed to 27% who identified themselves as Malaysians first rather than just 6% as Malays. In 2011, however, there is a slight drop as only about 6% described themselves as Malay first. In contrast, only about 3% of Chinese and 16% of Indians identified themselves by their religion. Meanwhile, most Chinese (58%) and Indians (63%) saw themselves as Malaysians first, while 24 % of Chinese and 11% of Indians identified themselves by their ethnicity. It can be summed that most Malaysians except the dominant group Malays see themselves as Malaysians first. Whether this is a worrying trend of another phase in the country's episode of cultural identification remains open to debate.

According to Dina Zaman, although the Constitution stipulates in Article 160 that a Malay is a person who professes the religion of Islam and habitually speaks the Malay language as well as conforms to the Malay custom, there is also a growing trend among young groups of Malaysian Muslim that is showing a disregard for Islamic faith, belief, as well as the Malay culture. Although they are formally identified Muslims, especially in public, some are actually either agnostic or have little regard for the Islamic faith.

Parallel to that, there are also splinter groups of young Malaysians that are showing increasing disenchantment towards their leaders who they feel have failed them miserably and these youngsters are shaping their own identity and their own version of what Islam means to them. These young groups, who make up the young voters group, are shifting. Interestingly, they are not so much in support of the current administration nor are they enchanted by the opposition. They are, however, more educated, more active, and more political than their predecessors. The huge class divide among the Malays themselves may also explain why some more religious and more educated youngsters in the country are opting for a third way, one described by Dina Zaman as the 'third force'. For these youngsters, the issue of 'bread and butter' is a bigger issue together with issues of good governance, integrity, transparency, and the economic well-being of the country rather than mundane political issues constantly highlighted in the media. Though it is very easy to turn a blind eye towards these groups, Dina Zaman believes that these youngsters in the country will be the ones who will shape the future trajectory of the country; as they will be the economic and political drivers of Malaysia in its post-modern era. These changes that are happening on the ground, however, are not as black and white as one carved out in the Constitution, hence the need to relook at some of these recurring issues.

The contested issue of identity and its significance in Malaysia, according to the speaker, is not one that should be downplayed. While it is easy to just curb the discussion or turn a deaf ear towards such conversations, the speaker believes that these types of discussions and conversation will persist despite its constraints. While she recognizes that some multicultural discussions can sometimes be counterproductive, in that they create more noises than contribute towards meaningful discourse, she believes that having the right discussions in the right environment with the right people adds value and contribution to the ongoing debate. However, one should not be demonized just for saying something out of the norm or what is expected; as these can sometimes open up conversations and allow people to share something that they have never felt comfortable talking about previously. These discussions, she believes, are what further shapes and illustrates into substantial actions.

As far as multicultural society is concerned, there are lots of meaningful discussions to shed light to. Indeed, learning from one another is needed, despite through different pathways. As they say, though there are various ways towards a certain goal, the ultimate destination is usually always the same as there are always subtle ways to agree on our common grounds in spite of our differences. The speaker shared her story of her pilgrimage to Mecca as she believes it exemplifies this notion well. As she was about to perform her prayers, she was captivated as she saw that there were Muslims from different parts of the world who perform their rituals differently, in their own distinct ways in the sacred land of Islam. Some women were praying while holding their babies, some were wearing their hijabs differently while others even showed some of their hair while praying. When she questioned and asked them about this, she remembered what a lady said to her. 'There is more than one way to God.'

## **Issues Raises**

- Issues of identity also raises the bigger issue of integrity in the country. Identities in the form of citizenship, for instance, can be bought and this has impacted the social fabric in states such as Sabah. Being poor and desperate can also lead one into buying an identity.
- While there are a lot of interesting research being done for instance by local universities about the local identity of the people, sometimes these essential information are not disseminated to the public given the lack of communication and marketing skills of the universities.
- Malaysia is still largely an under-researched country as far as identity and multicultural society is concerned. Therefore, it is important that individuals with meaningful information about Malaysians and its identity find the right avenues to get their research and words out to the public.
- Identity is something that keeps evolving as society matures. Just like individuals who go into different phases in their lives, countries also face similar phases. The contested issue of identity, though, might never be resolved, and will be beleaguered in different dimensions as the society evolves and matures.
- The need for having multicultural discussions also raises the issues of getting the right type of discussions out. Instead of just having discussions among the educated and intellectuals in an urban setting, there is a critical need to have discussions with people at grassroots levels, in the right type of environment.
- There is also a need to revisit the Constitution as some articles may no longer be relevant in our post-modern context

### **About the Speaker**

Dina Zaman is the Executive Director of IMAN Research Consulting. Dina has a Master degree in Creative Writing from the University of Lancaster, UK and honours degree in

Communications from Western Michigan University, US and works in the media. She has written a book on Muslim Malaysians entitled I am Muslim and covers Muslims life in her columns for Malaysiakini.com, the Malaysian Insider and the Malay Mail Online. She was a recipient of the Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectual Fellowship in 2012, and her research was a comparative study on saints in Indonesia and Malaysia. She is currently compiling her published essays for a new book. .

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