“Malaysia is not an Islamic state…”

Shahzada Irfan Ahmed January 19, 2014

Dr. Mohammad Kamarulnizam bin Abdullah is the chairman Curriculum Development Council, Institute of Diplomacy, Timor Leste, and editorial consultant, Institute for Public Security of Malaysia (IPSOM), Ministry of Internal Affairs. He was deputy president, Malaysian Association for International Studies (AIS) 2012-13. His publications include The Role of the Conservative Christian Movements in the US-Israel, Malaysia’s Role in Invigorating NAM’s Bandung Spirit, and Shifting Discourses in Social Sciences: Nexus of Knowledge and Power.

During his recent visit to Pakistan, he delivered a lecture at the Center of Public Policy and Governance, FC College, Lahore on ‘State, Religion and Democracy — The Malaysian Perspective’. The lecture was part of the series of dialogues on the topic, being carried out by the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), Islamabad, with the support of the Heinrich Boll Stiftung (HBS) and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara.

Here, he talks to TNS about different aspects of democracy in Malaysia, the role of the religion in the affairs of the state and relations between different ethno-religious groups...

The News on Sunday: How has Malaysia succeeded in maintaining harmonious religious and ethnic relations among its?

Mohammad Kamarulnizam bin Abdullah: The history of these relations can be traced back to the time of Independence. At that time Malay Muslims were 49 per cent of the total population and conservatives wanted Malaysia to be an Islamic. But under an agreement with the British, it had been decided that it cannot become an Islamic state. Therefore, the country opted for English style parliamentary democracy.

The state refrained from imposing itself and let the culture of integration prosper on its own. It focussed on education and helped the Malays who were economically under-privileged to catch up with others. There were ethnic clashes in 1969 in which Chinese were the target; there was a perception that Malays were wary of their wealth and increasing influence.
Besides, there were disputes over the promotion of Malay as the official language. The period that followed is known for a noticeable Muslim bias where Malays were supported by the state in improving their economic conditions. Despite these issues, Malaysia overcame these problems and opted for policies of integration. The 60:40 ratio between Muslims and non-Muslims means the majority is not so overwhelming to call itself one without giving space to others.

I would say education was the biggest tool Malaysia could use to promote the culture of co-habitation that exists today.

TNS: How did the country transform itself within a few decades? Do you think the country’s demography had a role?

MKA: Yes, that’s true to a great extent. The demographic pressures in Malaysia were never so high as is the case with highly populous countries like Pakistan. So, it was easy to manage them and spare resources for development. However, it may be one of the reasons but not the only one. Here I need to explain one thing. Though these pressures are manageable, Malaysia is a demographically complex country.

There is no ethnic border and people with different ethnic backgrounds are spread all over the country. They have to live and interact with each other every day. Malays are 51 per cent of the population, so they have to be accommodative towards others and go for power sharing with other ethnicities such as Chinese, Indians etc. Tolerance is the key to peaceful living in this scenario. This trait has helped them shun their difference and struggle for the collective growth of the country.

TNS: How do you define the political system of Malaysia where state religion is Islam but the country does not claim to be an Islamic state?

MKA: I would simply state that Malaysia is not an Islamic state. It is a Muslim majority state and the ratio, as I mentioned earlier, between Muslims and non-Muslims is 60:40. Under the Constitution of Malaysia, Islam is the official religion of the state but it is not an Islamic state. The King is the protector of Islam. Non-Muslims are free to practice their religion but are barred from preaching it to Muslims. I would say the tensions between different faiths have subsided over the years but intra-faith issues have surfaced.

In Malaysia, only the Sunnis prevail and Shias are not even allowed to profess their thoughts. So, the current challenge the country faces is about how to control spread of Shiaism.

TNS: Malaysia’s success is attributed to its visionary leadership? What do you have to say?

MKA: Yes, this factor has played a major role in Malaysia’s success and ensured continuity in the formulation of policies and their implementation. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has been in power since Malaysia’s independence in 1957. The 22 years of Mahathir Mohamad saw the country progress at an extraordinary pace. It was he who introduced the new development policy, designed to increase economic wealth for all Malaysians, rather than just Malays. This period saw a shift from an agriculture-based economy to a manufacturing-based and then to ICT-based services industry.

Today, it manufactures one of the world’s best electronic equipment, computers, laptops etc. Besides, it was again Mahatair who introduced Islamic banking products and carved a niche. His focus was on the rich Muslim countries who deposited their wealth in western banks and had never looked towards the east. Today, Malaysia is the world leader in Islamic and Shariah-compliant banking products.

TNS: You said people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds have learnt to co-exist in Malaysia? How did that happen?

MKA: In Malaysia, Malays, Indians and Chinese agreed that they will let each other’s culture prosper side by side. Unlike India, Malaysia opted for a policy of integration rather than assimilation. There are Chinese type schools,
Indian type schools and what not. For quite long, the sign boards would carry messages/text in four different languages — Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese. This culture of integration has helped us understand each other and we respect each other’s values and limitations. A Chinese would never invite a Muslim to a place where pork is served.

TNS: How do you explain the concept of dynamic Islam in the Malaysian context?

MKA: Even if Malaysia is not declared an Islamic state, it does not mean religion is not important for us. The concept revolves around the coexistence of religion, polity and society. Religion is not imposed but those practicing it out of will have full freedom. For example, the state schools impart secular education in the morning and if a student wants to get religious education he can have afternoon classes. The children can be sent to private religious schools as well but the control of educational content remains with the state. In high schools, children can opt for schools where there is a mixture of both secular and religious education.

TNS: The Christians in Malaysia have been stopped from using the word “Allah”. Does it bode well with the concept of inter-faith harmony?

MKA: This is definitely an issue but I would say there is a reason for this. This has never happened in the country’s history, so why this time? The issue was raised when the Church translated Bible in Malay and used the word Allah which is an Arabic word. As Malays are very possessive towards the use of world Allah, there was commotion among them. The king of a state, who is the protector of Islam under the constitution, gave a decree imposing this restriction. There was also a concern among Malays that the Malay translation of Bible could be used to preach Christianity to Muslims which is prohibited in the country. Besides, the ruling is limited to peninsular Malaysia and applicable under certain conditions.

TNS: In Malaysia, the state controls flow of information, especially that which it thinks may harm peace and security of the country. How does it control social media?

MKA: We realise there cannot be state control on social media. But, at the same time, it believes people are accountable for what they post there. They can be held accountable for slander, spreading fitna etc. We do have a law in place to check misuse of state media.