

Rectifying the Narratives of "Malay Is Islam" and "Malay Supremacy"

The narratives of "Malay supremacy" (*ketuanan Melayu*) and "Malays are inseparable from Islam" are frequently exploited by democratic political parties, particularly during election seasons. They have essentially become a must-have menu of every campaign. The objective behind these narratives is not sincerely for the well-being of Malays or Islam, but rather to secure votes. These racial sentiments, cloaked in Islamic rhetoric and compounded by scare-mongering campaigns predicting dire consequences for the Malays should other races take power, typically resonate deeply with Malay voters.

Behind these narratives, the reality remains that when Malays assume power, they are the very ones who empower, enrich, prioritize, and depend upon other races. Concurrently, they are also the ones who oppress, marginalize, and usurp the rights of their fellow Malays. The Malay electorate has been repeatedly deceived, as those in authority continuously exploit these vulnerabilities to perpetuate their hold on power.

Amid the din of the current state elections (Johor and Negeri Sembilan), the same rhetoric continues to be wielded by competing political parties. Statements such as "Malay-Muslims must rule," "Malay and Islam are inseparable," and even "Malay is Islam" resonate loudly at campaign rallies and circulate pervasively across social media platforms. Ironically, some extol the greatness of the Malay race and its intrinsic connection to Islam to the extent that Chinese or Indian converts to Islam are colloquially described as having "entered the Malay fold" (*masuk Melayu*).

Simultaneously, the notion of Malay supremacy linked to Islam is continuously stoked. The intent is to craft a narrative asserting that only one's own party champions the cause of Malays and Islam, thereby obligating Malay-Muslim voters to cast their ballots for them. It is deeply unfortunate that Malay-Muslim sentiments are reduced to mere party agendas for electoral gain. During elections, they trumpet the Malay-Muslim rallying cry, yet once in power, they oppress the Malays and marginalize Islam.

At first glance, racial sentiments draped in the dress of Islam may sound appealing. Which Malay would not desire to be governed by Malay-Muslim authority? Yet beneath this superficial appeal lies a fundamental misconception – one that, if allowed to take root, will distort the understanding of Islam and confine this universal faith into the narrow box of ethnicity.

Malay Is Not Islam, Islam Is Not Malay

Whether acknowledged or not, Malays and Islam represent two distinct entities that cannot be conflated. Malay is not synonymous with Islam, nor is Islam synonymous with Malay. In truth, Malay is an ethnicity, whereas Islam is *ad-Deen* (a comprehensive way of life and divine system).

The Malays constitute an ethnic group defined by lineage, language, and culture. Islam, conversely, is a complete way of life revealed by Allah (swt) for all humanity, transcending race, skin colour, ancestry, and geographical borders.

"Ethnicity" is a creation of Allah (swt) intended to enable human beings to know one another. Islam, on the other hand, is the divine *ad-Deen* ordained by Allah (swt) so that humanity may adhere to the true religion and govern their lives by it – uniting them through the bond of creed (*Aqeedah*) into a single global community (*Ummah*). Equating the two is not merely erroneous; it is a fundamental category mistake. Allah (swt) says: يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا

“O humanity! خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾
Indeed, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware” [Al-Hujurat (49): 13].

This verse explicitly clarifies that ethnicity is merely a means of identification, not a benchmark of nobility. What elevates an individual's status in the sight of Allah (swt) is neither their Malay nor Arab heritage, nor their lineage, but rather their righteousness (Taqwa). Consequently, it is incumbent upon every Muslim to strive for honour through piety, rather than championing ethnicity in pursuit of prestige.

Here lies the profound distinction between ethnicity and religion. Ethnicity does not represent religion, nor does religion represent ethnicity; there is no intrinsic link between the two. Being Arab does not equate to being Muslim; being Turkish does not equate to being Muslim; likewise, being Malay does not equate to being Muslim. No ethnicity can claim to embody Islam, nor does belonging to a specific race render one automatically Muslim.

Ethnicity is not a matter of own choice; we can neither choose it nor alter it throughout our lives. No human being chooses to be born Malay, Arab, Chinese, or Indian – it is purely a divine decree determined solely by Allah (swt), entirely beyond our control.

Religion, conversely, involves choice. Human beings are endowed with intellect and granted the freedom to choose between truth and falsehood, between submitting to Allah (swt) or turning away, and ultimately between Paradise and Hellfire. Thus, it is illogical to derive pride or attribute nobility to a characteristic one neither chose nor possesses the capacity to alter.

True nobility resides in the choices an individual makes – when one chooses faith and submission to the truth, regardless of ethnic origin, nobility is attained. Allah (swt) opens the doors of honour to all humanity through the conscious choice of faith, rather than confining it behind the wall of lineage that no one can choose. How, then, can one equate an involuntary condition (ethnicity) with an endeavour that demands deliberate choice and responsibility (religion)?

Hence, the assertion that Malays and Islam are inseparable is fundamentally flawed. Historically, the ancestral religion of the Malays was not Islam, and even after embracing Islam, numerous individuals have committed apostasy. This is the reality:

Malay and Islam can indeed be separated, and history demonstrates that they frequently have been.

Rasulullah (saw) Was Neither a Champion of Nationalism nor Arab Supremacy

The Messenger of Allah (saw) sternly rejected tribalism and nationalism (Asabiyyah). He said: «لَيْسَ مِنَّا مَنْ دَعَا إِلَى عَصَبِيَّةٍ وَلَيْسَ مِنَّا مَنْ قَاتَلَ عَلَى عَصَبِيَّةٍ وَ لَيْسَ مِنَّا مَنْ مَاتَ عَلَى عَصَبِيَّةٍ» **“He is not one of us who calls to 'Asabiyyah (tribalism/nationalism), he is not one of us who fights for 'Asabiyyah, and he is not one of us who dies upon 'Asabiyyah”** [Narrated by Abu Dawud].

Given such an unequivocal prohibition, how could one possibly make ethnicity the benchmark of the Islamic struggle?

Consider the persona of the Messenger of Allah (saw) himself. He was an Arab from the Quraysh – the most noble tribe in Mecca. Had ethnicity been something worthy of championing, he would have been the most entitled to champion it, given the universally recognized nobility of his lineage across the Arabian Peninsula at the time.

Yet throughout the 23 years of his mission, never once did he advocate for Arab supremacy or fight to establish the dominance of the Arab race over others. He did not come to exalt Arabs or the Quraysh; he came with Islam for all of humanity, elevating humankind through Islam.

Indeed, he elevated Bilal – a dark-skinned former Abyssinian slave – to proclaim the call to prayer (Adhan) from atop the Kaaba, eclipsing the Arab nobility who took immense pride in their lineage. This is what the Messenger of Allah (saw) demonstrated to us: the struggle for Islam, not the struggle for race; the supremacy of Islam, not Arab supremacy.

If the Messenger of Allah (saw), who possessed the most noble Arab lineage, did not champion Arab supremacy, on what grounds or textual evidence do we today justify championing Malay supremacy or deriving pride from Malay ancestry? The Prophet (saw) said: «يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، أَلَا إِنَّ رَبَّكُمْ وَاحِدٌ، وَإِنَّ أَبَاكُمْ وَاحِدٌ، أَلَا لَا فَضْلَ لِعَرَبِيٍّ عَلَى أَعْجَمِيٍّ، وَلَا لَأَعْجَمِيٍّ عَلَى عَرَبِيٍّ، وَلَا «O people! Know that your Lord is One, and your father (Adam) is one. Know that an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab ('Ajam), nor does a non-Arab have superiority over an Arab; nor does a red-skinned (fair) person have superiority over a black-skinned person, nor a black-skinned person over a red-skinned person, except by righteousness (Taqwa). All of you are from Adam, and Adam was created from dust” [Narrated by Ahmad and al-Baihaqi]. He (saw) also said: «مَنْ تَعَزَّى بِعِزِّ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ، فَأَعْضُوهُ بِأَيْرِ أَبِيهِ وَلَا تَكْنُوا» “Whoever boasts with the boasts of Jahiliyyah (tribalism, nationalism, lineage), tell him to bite his father's male organ, and do not use euphemisms” [Narrated by Imam Ahmad and an-Nasa’i].

Such is the prohibited and abhorrent nature of ethnic nationalism. Historically, nationalist struggles have never brought good to the Ummah; rather, they fragmented the Ummah. It was precisely this narrow thought that caused the downfall of the Islamic State – the state founded by the Messenger of Allah (saw) in Medina. The collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 was driven by the rise of nationalism during that era, which rendered Turks and Arabs incapable of remaining united despite sharing the same faith.

This ethnic fanaticism (nationalism) was fully exploited by the Western colonial powers to dismantle the Khilafah (Caliphate) and fracture Muslim unity into small, weak nation-states – a reality that persists to this day. The poison of nationalism injected by the West continues to weaken the body of the Ummah. Regrettably, existing political parties, which ought to purge this toxin from the Ummah, choose instead to administer higher doses, warranting the Ummah remains weak and unaware to Islam as its true remedy.

At this juncture, we must speak candidly: "ethnic supremacy" is not part of the language of Islam. Islam has never taught, and in fact explicitly rejects, the concept of racial supremacy. There is not, and cannot be, any concept of Malay supremacy, Turkish supremacy, Arab supremacy, or the like. Under no circumstances should the Malay ethnic struggle be conflated with the Islamic struggle. The Malay struggle (Asabiyyah) is ignoble and prohibited, whereas the Islamic struggle is noble and obligatory. Truth (Haq) and falsehood (Batil) cannot be conflated, nor will they ever mix.

The true struggle is not aimed at elevating specific races to the position of "masters," but rather at establishing the Deen of Allah (swt) as the supreme authority obeyed by all nations.

Conclusion

Remember, O Muslims! Without Islam, the Malays possess no intrinsic value in the sight of Allah (swt). Yet Islam, even without the Malays, remains complete as a mercy to all creation. Therefore, cease propagating narratives that confuse the Muslim community, cease championing race, and cease exalting ethnic supremacy, for we shall only be humiliated through it. Realign the struggle purely for the sake of Islam, and Allah (swt) will surely honour us through it.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Abdul Hakim Othman

Official Spokesperson of Hizb ut Tahrir in Malaysia