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Outlook 2017

Outlook 2017: Rise of Muslim hardliners



Muslims holding a street protest against Jakarta governor Basuki on Nov 4. Race-based politics is a concern in Indonesia and Malaysia. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

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PAS push for heavier penalties in Syariah courts and Ahok's blasphemy trial cause concern This is the fourth of a five-part series looking at the key events and issues facing the world in 2017. Today, The Straits Times looks at race and religion in South-east Asia and PM Modi's challenges in India.

Francis Chan Indonesia Bureau Chief In Jakarta

A controversial move by Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), an ultra-conservative party in Malaysia, to push through legislative changes that will empower Syariah courts to pass heavier sentences is now under way.

The ruling party Umno, which is led by Prime Minister Najib Razak, is backing the plan - giving a lot more weight to the proposed Bill.

In neighbouring Indonesia, hard-line Muslims in the hundreds of thousands have been rallying against a Chinese Christian politician, demanding his arrest over allegations of insulting Islam.

These recent incidents in two of South-east Asia's largest Muslim-majority countries, which historically practise a moderate form of Islam, have prompted observers to question if Muslims in the region are growing intolerant.

There are also concerns that the religionisation of politics would not just hurt the moderate image of both countries but also inflame relations with their close neighbours.

Veteran diplomat Barry Desker highlighted that the ethno-religious furore could have a spillover effect beyond Indonesia and Malaysia, and across the Asean grouping.

"In Myanmar, the plight of Rohingya Muslims has galvanised opposition in Muslim-majority states in the region such as Malaysia and could undermine support for a delicate ongoing peace process in the country," said Mr Desker, a distinguished fellow at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

His comments came against the backdrop of recent efforts by Indonesia to offer aid to the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group within a predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, and Mr Najib's accusation of the Aung San Suu Kyi government, an Asean neighbour, of genocide.

Ms Saleena Saleem, an associate research fellow at RSIS, noted a growing religiosity among Malays in Malaysia. This, she said, has led to more Malays identifying themselves by religion and calling for wider implementation of Islamic laws.

She added that these laws serve as ominous harbingers of how secularity is being eroded within the Malaysian polity.

Race-based politics is also a concern in Malaysia and Indonesia.

In Malaysia, the Malay Muslim parties of Umno and PAS are working together to push Islamic issues, despite anger from non-Muslims led by the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party.

Dr Norshahril Saat, a fellow at the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, said there are concerns on whether the PAS-proposed changes to the Syariah Courts Act, or Act 355, are a step towards the implementation of hudud - punitive Islamic laws that prescribe amputation, stoning and whipping.

"What is more worrying is the tone of the debate regarding Act 355, which plays up religious sentiments harking back to 1969, when Malaysia experienced bloody racial riots," said Dr Norshahril.

There were such fears in Jakarta when conservative Muslims swarmed the capital three times in as many months to protest against Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama for blasphemy.

A riot broke out at the end of the second protest held on Nov 4, invoking memories of the street violence in 1998, when the capital was gripped by racial tensions.

Basuki, a Chinese Christian better known by his nickname Ahok, is standing for another term in the city's gubernatorial election in February. Race has been an issue during campaigning.

The case against Basuki is now being heard in court, and he may be thrown behind bars for up to five years, if found guilty of blasphemy.

Like the Syariah Courts Bill amendments, Basuki's blasphemy trial will test the racial and religious tolerance of Muslims.

But is this sweeping wave of Islamic conservatism in the region a response to the clarion call for a purer Islam in a world where anti-Muslim rhetoric seemingly dominates?

Mr Desker said conflicts such as these could highlight the negative role played by religious believers who are unwilling to recognise the diverse religious influences present in contemporary societies.

He referred to several examples, such as the recent United States presidential election, which saw the rise of the "alt-right" who pushed for a Christian white America, and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has attracted radical Muslim extremists in South-east Asia.

"Diversity can either be a source of strength or weakness, depending on how a society, its leaders, and its people choose to respond to it," he added.

Indeed, Mr Najib's support of the controversial amendments to Act 355 has added to the unease among non-Muslims in Malaysia.

The prosecution of Basuki, a process the police and Attorney- General's Office accelerated due to pressure from Muslim hardliners, has had the same effect in Indonesia, particularly among the Chinese minority in the capital.

RSIS inter-faith analyst Nursheila Muez said the protests against Basuki demonstrated how religion, in its decontextualised form, was employed for politics. "What is at stake crucially is how religious rationalisation, that stems from a decontextualised reading of the Quran that is unfriendly towards Christians and other non-Muslims, can become encrusted into the tradition of Islam in Indonesia."

Similarly, Dr Norshahril expects political temperatures to rise in Malaysia at the next parliamentary sitting in March, with conservative Muslim groups holding that those rejecting Act 355 are undermining Islam's rightful position.

TOMORROW

Filling the power vacuum in the Middle East and the regional hot spots that present risks for the world and the new Trump presidency

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