MANAGING DIVERSITY AND BUILDING PEACE: Lessons Learnt from Civilisational Experience

Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman
Commissioner for Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC)
of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

President
Wadah Pencerdasan Ummah (WADAH)
(The Movement for an Informed Society, Malaysia)

Introduction

Let us start off with two major streams of political thought that are dominant in the present international and regional relations – mooted not from our own worldview.

First, Samuel P. Huntington’s thesis *Clash of Civilisation* has somewhat become a self-prophecy for some to perpetrate a policy justification on the encroachment into regions recognized as the Islamic fault lines. Whilst the thesis espouses that people’s cultural and religious identities have become the primary source of conflicts (Huntington, 1993), the subsequent target seems to focus more on the Muslim-majority regions. Future conflicts will no longer be fought between countries, but between different religions or cultures.

Second, the Politics of Identity which subsequently sees the rise of Extreme Conservatism and Nationalism, not just in the less developed countries of Asia and Africa, but also in midst of mature and developed societies of Europe and America. In the identity politics, prioritizing is based on personal racial, religious, ethnic or cultural identities. In the identity politics, alliances are forged based on exclusionism rather than inclusivism. People move away from the middle ground and engaged within their own cocoons of distinctiveness.

---

1 The thesis was first proposed in a 1992 lecture at the American Enterprise Institute. It was then published in a 1993 Foreign Affairs. Huntington later developed his thesis into a book, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” which was published in 1996.
Whilst we acknowledge the fact that our model is not a melting pot of various identities that have been done away, what we are saying here is that our approach to engagement should not be exclusive – in the sense that we should embrace everybody, despite our differences.

**Legacy Issues**

These two streams of thoughts are sufficient for us to reflect on the state of Muslim minorities within our own neighbours in Southeast Asia. Look at the recent experiences of Pattani in Southern Thailand – a struggle of more than 100 years, the Moros in Southern Philippines – since the colonization of the Spaniards, the Rohingyaas of Myanmar – since the British occupation era. These are the three (3) hotspots that last until today. They are the minorities in non-Muslim majority countries.

At the same time, look at the non-Muslim minorities in the Muslim-majority countries and you will see the marked differences that reflect the very reasons why the Jews and the Christian flocked to al-Andalus more than 600 years ago. We acknowledge that we have differences in identities, in our ethnicities and in many other dimensions if one were to really dissect and pick up the differences. But lest we forget that we should focus more on the similarities – on the common bonds amongst various different peoples.

There are other hotspots in a larger region; for instance, the disputed Jammu-Kashmir and Palestine etc. But for the purpose of this occasion, we will focus on this area of Southeast Asia or the Malay Archipelago as it was known hundreds of years ago.

Having observed the different treatment of these Muslim minorities, there have been creeping sentiments that pull the Middle Ground towards the narrow politics of identity. It is a challenge to deny that this narrow politics of identity has slowly shifted the shape of socio-politics within this region.

We must always remain within the Middle Ground amongst the silent majority from all communities. There are no problems that cannot be resolved. Only open minds can think through the problems, shifting the crux of the issues, think through the solutions and follow through the various initiatives.

We are now left with this legacy issue: **how should we manage this diversity and go on building peace amongst us?** The first step is to arrest the gathering force of this politics of identity. But first we need to understand what it takes to have a peaceful coexistence.

In its simplest form, we now have the option whether to pursue a **confrontational path** along the legacy issues that have mushroomed in the past or **cooperative and inclusive approach** that has been exemplified by our illustrious civilization?
To have a peaceful coexistence, we must first have peace with ourselves.

**Fiqh at-Ta’ayush al-Silmi**

[6] Diversity in terms of people of all races, ethnicities, languages and cultures is a blessing from ALLah SWT. By His Will, He could have created a unified people; but He did not (Surah Yunus, 10: 99; Surah Hud, 11: 118). It is also by His Will that not all men are believers, and He forsakes some believers and other unbelievers (Surah al-Taghabun, 64: 2; Surah al-Kahf, 18: 29). Here, we understand that the diversity or ta’addudiyyah, including the matters of beliefs and religion is of the same nature and is the sunnatuLLah – determined by ALLah SWT. “And among His Signs is the creation of heavens and earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge” (Surah ar-Rum, 30:22).

ALLah SWT emphasized that His creation of different races and ethnicities, and languages is to enable interactions for them to know one another and to create mutual understanding and willingness to help one another for mutual well-being (Surah al-Hujurat, 49: 13).

[7] The Prophet SAW was sent to all mankind to invite them to believe in ALLah SWT. Despite that, in addition to Islam, ALLah SAW allowed the emergence of various faiths and religions throughout the world. Although Islam was the last religion to abolish the laws of Prophets Musa a.s. and Isa a.s., the fact is that some people do not accept Islam and still adhere to their other religions.

Islam recognizes this reality. Even the Quran acknowledges them as al-Nasara and al-Yahud and outlines the guidelines on how Muslims should interact with them. This makes Islam the only religion that establishes ways of communicating and interacting with those who embrace other faiths. These guidelines become part of the Islamic law itself. At this juncture, we must also recognize that there are many other religions practised in this world.

**Living Together in Peace**

[8] Within the realities of different racial diversity, skin colour, culture, religion and belief, Islam calls on the Muslim to be fair even to those who disbelieve (ahl al-siyirr). “ALLah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion nor drove you out of your homes. Verily, ALLah loves those who deal with equity” (Surah al-Mumtahanah, 60: 8).

[9] According to the above verse, ALLah SWT does not prevent the Muslims from doing good deeds (an-tabarruu-hum) and being fair (an-taqsiithu ilay-him) against the non-Muslims who do not fight the Muslims and do not drive them out of their homes.

---

2. For further elaboration on Fiqh at-Ta’ayush al-Silmi, see Abdul Halim Ismail’s writing at the following website: http://wadahutara.blogspot.com/2017/02/?m=1 (accessed on 4 February 2020). Abdul Halim Ismail is the Deputy President of WADAH.
Islam has laid clear the principle of coexistence. This principle provides the framework on how to accommodate the diversity.

Islam’s emphasis on upholding the concepts and principles of universal human rights, human dignity, freedom of religion and social justice need to work together with past historical narratives. The basic principles outlined in the Quran should be the basis of inter-ethnic relations and a guide for building a peaceful life together. In addition to the above verse (i.e. Surah al-Mumtahanah, 60: 8), several other key principles are expressed in the following verses:

“Verily, ALLah enjoins al-‘Adl (i.e. justice) and al-Ihsan (to do good deeds) and giving (help) to relatives (kith) and forbids al-Fahsha’ (i.e. evil deeds) and al-Munkar (i.e. disobedience), and al-Baghy (all kinds of oppression). He admonishes you, that you may take heed” (Surah Al-Nahl, 16:90).

“Oh mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with ALLah is that (believer) who has at-Taqwa. Verily, ALLah is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Surah al-Hujurat, 49:13).

“There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path.” (Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 256).

Some of the most important things to understand from these verses are the principles of justice, human unity, living peacefully together, mutual respect and no coercion in religion and belief. Rached Ghanouchi in Huquq al-Muwatinah holds the view that the general laws contained in these verses are the de jure Islamic policies regarding the equality of their non-Muslim citizenship.

The existence of such categories as ahl al-dhimmah or dhimmiy in the early Islamic history was not intended to discriminate against the non-Muslim citizens under the Islamic rule. The categorization is the commitment of the Muslim Government to provide protection for the non-Muslims and to ensure that their rights are protected against any injustices.

Today, the non-Muslims are no longer the dhimmiy. They are no longer conquered; they are not slaves or prisoners of war or those who break the peace treaties as it was then in history. They were born in Muslim-majority countries and they earn their livelihood in those countries – as partners to nation-building. They are lawful citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else. Many contemporary Islamic thinkers accept the fact that there is no justification for dhimmiy or non-dhimmiy categorization – as put forth by Fahmi Huwaydi in his book, Muwatinun la Dhimmiyyun.
**Sahifah Madinah as a Model**

[11] One of the most important references to forge peaceful and meaningful relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims is *Sahifah Madinah* which contains 47 articles. The first section (Articles 1 to 23) is on the rights and responsibilities of Muslims comprising Muhajirin and Ansar. The second section (Articles 24 to 47) deals with the rights and responsibilities of the Jews and others, *Sahifah Madinah* which was preceded by consultations with all the stakeholders, was accepted without objection by all Madinah residents.

[12] Some of the articles from this *Sahifah Madinah* are worth mentioning. For instance, Article 1 confirms that the *Sahifah Madinah* was from the Prophet Muhammad as the Messenger of Allah SWT, made between the Muslims of Quraysh (Muhajirin) and the people of Yathrib (Ansar and Jews) and those who were with them and join them.

Article 25 made it clear that *Sahifah Madinah* recognized all groups in Madinah as citizens. Prophet Muhammad SAW mentioned everybody’s responsibilities that must be fulfilled. They were given the freedom to practise their religious teachings without interruption; but they have the same responsibilities to defend Madinah.

Article 39 states that, Madinah is a safe haven for those who uphold *Sahifah Madinah*, i.e. security guarantee to all its citizens.

Article 40 states that neighbors should be treated as one soul – no harm can be inflicted upon them. This guarantees the safety and security of the community.

[13] Through this *Sahifah*, a social contract was concluded and a new ummah was born that brought together Muslims (Muhajirin and Ansar) and various Jewish groups located in Madinah. This proves that the unity built based on religion does not create conflicts and does not impede the process of building a united nation.

*Sahifah Madinah* forged a peaceful co-existence, based on the principles of justice, mutual respect and recognition of human rights. It has successfully unified various groups and tribes, religions, and cultures. This resulted in a single community which defied any discriminatory acts.

[14] *Sahifah Madinah* became the first democratic constitution in the world history. With the birth of this constitution, the first Islamic country was formed based on multiracial and multicultural communities. This *Sahifah* puts freedom, justice and equality at its core and it reflects the basic teachings of the Quran. It is a solid proof that Islam rejects any forms of coercion, injustice and discrimination. The ideas contained in the *Sahifah* reflect the openness and tolerance of Islam in addressing
and resolving issues related to the racial, religious and cultural diversity. It should be noted that the Sahifah model preceded the law on dhimmah.³

[15] Perhaps it needs to be mentioned that some of the virtues and characteristics of the Sahifah are reflected in the Constitution of Malaysia such as the freedom of religion, citizenship, rights and equality, the role of Parliament as a legislative body that shares the responsibility to defend the nation's integrity and dignity. However, the Constitution should be supported by collective awareness to ensure the well-being of a united Malaysia who prioritize tolerance, respect and mutual understanding over prejudices and chauvinism. The willingness to sacrifice, to be tolerant and to accommodate must prevail. The politics of communalism fuelled by emotions and hatred will thwart any attempts at harmony between the races.

[16] The heydays of Al-Andalus or Islamic Spain, especially during the reign of Abd al-Rahman III (912-961) had succeeded in establishing an enlightened society with the model of la convivencia. Full freedom was given to non-Muslims to practise their religion and culture without interruption. This enabled the Jews and Christians to also play important roles in the economy, businesses and trading activities. They were also given important and strategic positions in the government, administrative and diplomatic matters.

Al-Andalus later emerged as a nation not only known for its economic prosperity, but also for its scientific and cultural development including in the fields of philosophy, metaphysics, architecture and literature. For over 400 years, Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in peace and harmony. That era was considered as the best model on how a multi-racial and multi-religious society can live together in peace (al-ta’a-yush al-silmi).

Concluding Remarks

[17] Recent developments in many parts of the world, including our own, have seen increasing multi-ethnic incidents of extreme and provocative nature. Most of these incidents have been successfully mitigated, but not without “injuries”. It seems like certain groups are more than willing to exploit sensitive issues, and ridicule certain beliefs and practices. It got worse when there are political parties who are also willing to exploit these issues as a matter of political survival.

[18] It should be noted that it is already fated that Muslims and non-Muslims will continue to co-exist. Under no circumstances can it be possible for the Muslims to live apart and refrain from interacting with the non-Muslims. Provocative actions and counter-reactions between both Muslims and non-Muslims will only lead to civil strife and negative feelings. It will never be good to anybody anywhere. We need to understand, as Muslims, these behaviours deviate from the true Islamic

way of life. ALlah SWT has cautioned against inciting hatred towards anybody in order to induce violence against them.

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for ALlah as just witnesses; and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just; that is nearer to piety; and fear ALlah. Verily, ALlah is Well-Acquainted with what you do” (Surah al-Maidah, 5: 8).

Governments need to build a peaceful coexistence as the basis for all the policies that they formulate. Priority must be given to strengthening the musyawarah involving all learned and wise leaders of all different communities. Open and honest dialogue and positive engagements contribute to a better understanding on the common goals needed to build a nation.

Political leaders should be more thoughtful and should therefore act as statesmen who are concerned about the country's future and its long-term interests. They need to refrain from playing racial and ethnic issues. If the country's leaders do not take firm stands on the principles of truth and justice, if people are not encouraged to respect one another or learn to appreciate differences and diversity and to be tolerant, we will once again face many more racially-induced catastrophes.

The approach that we should take should go beyond terminologies and concepts. Develop networking amongst the like-minded individuals – scholars, public intellectuals, activists, senior civil servants, students, ulama – all walks of life. We should have the likes of Cesar Adib Majul (1923-2003) of the Philippines, Surin Pitsuwan (1949-2017) of Thailand, Pak Muhammad Natsir (1908-1993), Pak B.J Habibie (1936-2019) of Indonesia, Anwar Ibrahim (1947-Present) of Malaysia, and many other leaders – even those who are still amongst us. They are all leaders in our own rights.

This Malay World has seen ups and downs, trials and tribulations of our own brands of civilisations in the past several centuries – from Majapahit to Pasai to Acheh to Melaka until they reach us today in our modern settings. Our interactions with many civilizations within this very region have convinced us that the best way to manage this diversity is through civilizational and inclusive approach. We may be forgiven because of our rhetorics; but we have done this in the past successfully until we were infested with the forceful encroachment of worldviews that are alien to us.


Clash of civilisations is actually a clash of ignorance – failure of many of us to seek first to understand the other cultures. We are mired in endless issues – simply because we fail to perform tabayyun, despite our enthusiasm and good intentions. All these mindless and spurious clashes of ignorance have usurped our energies and diverted our resources into wasteful imprudence.
Once understood, let’s pool our expertise to sort things out, chart our courses and follow through each and every step – all the way to peaceful resolutions. There will be challenges. It won’t be a smooth ride. We may fail, but we have no other choices but to persevere. And persevere we will with all our grit.

Thank You. *WaLLahu A’lam.*

Shah Alam, MALAYSIA
11 February 2020
BIOGRAPHY: AHMAD AZAM BIN AB RAHMAN

Ahmad Azam Ab Rahman was born on 21st June, 1960 in Selangor, Malaysia. He received his secondary education at St John Institution, one of the prestigious schools in the country. He completed his Diploma in Public Administration at Mara University of Technology and graduated from Indiana State University, USA with Bach. Of Sc. In Business Administration and from Stephen F. Austin State University, USA with Masters in Business Administration.

Ahmad Azam is a known figure in the social activism among the non-governmental organisations in Malaysia and at the international level. It started back while he was a university student in 1978. He is currently the President of Wadah Pencerdasan Umat (WADAH) – Movement for An Informed Society, Malaysia.

Ahmad Azam is newly elected as Independent Permanent Human Right Commissioner of The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (IPHRC-OIC) for 2019-2022 session.

Ahmad Azam is the Chairman of Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM) which he founded in 2001, a humanitarian across border organisation that had been sending missions to many parts of the world especially to the Southeast Asia and Middleeast countries that are in the war torn areas and also those facing natural disasters.

Ahmad Azam is known to be a training consultant especially in the areas of Ummatic Leadership training for the youths. Several workshops and camps were carried out to groom future Islamic leaders who will contribute to the development of the Muslim Ummah.

Ahmad Azam has been actively involved in advocating global peace and justice for many human right issues among others the Rohingya in Arakan, Myanmar since early 1990s. Consequently in 2010 he founded Persatuan Jaringan Islam Global Masa Depan (JREC), a non-governmental organisation that provides access to education to
Rohingya children in Malaysia. Currently JREC runs four Rohingya Education Centre (REC) schools in Peninsula Malaysia with student enrolment of almost 700.

At the international arena, Ahmad Azam was the founding member of the Union of NGOs of The Islamic World (UNIW) when it was established in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2005. The main objective is to unite Muslims all over the world through collaboration and networking among NGOs. Ahmad Azam is currently the Deputy Secretary-General of the organisation and also the UNIW representative of Asia-Pacific region for 2015-2020 session. As for the African region involvement, Ahmad Azam is the member of Board of Trustees of Munazzamat Dakwah Council, Sudan for the 2018-2022 session. It is a dakwah and humanitarian-based organisation for the African region.

Ahmad Azam is married to Nur Azlina Abdul Aziz who is also a social activist in educating Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia. Both of them are blessed with five children and four grandchildren.