

Looking into the important issues

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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WHAT were the chances of any leader of a country being featured on the front page of a leading newspaper in India on Nov 27, the time when Mumbai was under siege?

That was the day *The Times of India* carried this headline: "It's war on Mumbai". Others had "Warzone: Mumbai" (*New Indian Express*), "Mumbai under attack" (*Deccan Chronicle*), "Rash of terror attacks in Mumbai" (*The Hindu*).

The brazen "highly coordinated surprise" attack (some likened it to 911) which took place the night before was an obvious attention grabber, local and foreign, bearing in mind this was not the first time that a similar assault had taken place in the financial capital of India.

This time, at least 180 people lost their lives and many more were injured and traumatised.

Competing for the front page was cyclone Nisha, bearing down on Tamil Nadu, causing Chennai to record more than 100mm of rainfall and causing 20 deaths.

Flights and rail transportation were delayed. Exams at the University of Madras and Anna University had to be postponed while hundreds of thousands had to be evacuated.

Then, there were also stories of Indian nationals being stranded at the Bangkok airport where protesters had taken over the two airports. As a result, flights were either cancelled or diverted.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities Conference of the Executive Heads was deprived of its keynote speaker while other participants were trapped in Bangkok.

Despite all these traumatic events taking place, Malaysia somehow managed to steal some limelight on the front page of *The Times of India*.

It carried this headline: "Yoga ok without 'mantras'; Malaysian PM says as ban triggers protest."

It was strategically placed just under its masthead with the colour portrait of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on the top left-hand corner.

The accompanying report said Abdullah tried to "wade" into the yoga issue which by then had gained dubious popularity. He was quoted as saying that Muslims could practise the ancient exercise as long as it had no spiritual elements.

"I wish to state that a physical regime with no elements of worship can continue", meaning yoga is not banned. "I believe that Muslims are not easily swayed into polytheism," Abdullah, himself a prominent Islamic scholar, was quoted as saying by the Indian press.

In short, this statement practically reversed the decision announced earlier which had incited much dissatisfaction among many.

"What I understand from the decision of the National Fatwa Council is that it was aimed at explaining to Muslims the implications of yoga practice," the PM added.

If this is so, then it does not come across that way because the decision of the council has triggered uproar not only among moderate Muslims, but also elicited caution in its implementation from the royal state rulers who are the guardians and custodians of Islam. Somehow, the foreign press too understood it as a "ban" rather than an "explanation".

Recently, too, the council came under "scrutiny" for its decision on "tomboyism" (and alleged suggestion that pants are not for women).

The one on yoga further adds to the seeming selective issues that the council decides to descend upon.

Obviously, these are important to the members of the council.

What could be more important than the state of being of Malaysians, if not the world today? After all, the impact on Muslims and their faith cannot be underestimated.

Then, what about the financial meltdown?

Or the ailing state of the environment, both with pervasive, long-term consequences to a broader segment of the community?

Why not pass a *fatwa* on money politics, which is a cause for worry to the community?

How about reasserting the *fatwa* issued against tobacco use and smoking some years ago but which had no significant result?

Many ulama are still smoking and thousands of Muslims continue to die every year as though the passing of *fatwa* is a subject to be ridiculed.

Indeed, the chair of the National Fatwa Council has the dubious distinction of making it, by name, to this week's *Time* (Dec 8).

The council must demonstrate its seriousness by attempting things first, as matter of principle laid down by Islam. This includes following the right procedure by not usurping the rightful role of the Malay rulers as the constitutional custodians of Islam.

Only in this way can the community be convinced that the council is truly acting in their interest professionally.

Here's wishing our readers a meaningful Hari Raya Aidiladha.

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