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Valuable lessons of Park 51 for Malaysia

As another multi-ethnic, multi-faith country, Malaysia has much to learn from the Ground Zero Mosque controversy in the United States, writes **ELINA NOOR**



The proposed Islamic centre near Ground Zero is understandably emotive, given that it touches on religion. — AP picture

In recent weeks, the storm brewing over the planned community centre at Park 51, two blocks from the site of the World Trade Centre attacks, seems to have gathered momentum, from New York to Washington to the rest of the United States.

Park 51's lead developer, Sharif El-Gamal of Soho Properties, together with New York imam and long-time interfaith proponent Feisal Abdul Rauf, envision the centre to be dedicated to pluralism and service to the community. Among the world-class facilities planned for it are a swimming pool, basketball court, 500-seat auditorium, library and child-care services.

A Sept 11 memorial for quiet contemplation also figures in the design. Perhaps the most controversial part of this plan, and what has erupted into an intense national debate, is that the centre will also house a mosque open and accessible to all. In some circles, Park 51 is now simply referred to as the Ground Zero mosque.

Politicians have weighed in on Park 51's location, as have theologians and policy pundits. Even President Barack Obama has had something to say about the matter. Judging from comments following media articles on Park 51, much of America also has an opinion. That polls reveal a large majority of Americans (61 per cent by Time, 64 per cent by Fox News and 70 per cent by CNN) opposed to the construction of a mosque near ground zero is testament to this (notwithstanding that 61 per cent of those polled by Fox News believe that the developers have a right to build a mosque there).

If the objections are that the mosque will be included within the grounds of Park 51, it bears repeating that the mosque will be but one feature of the many other non-religious facilities Park 51 will accommodate.

If, on the other hand, the opposition is to the idea of the community centre being driven by Muslims in the first place, then the poll results are deeply disappointing and disconcerting. They speak to latent misgivings about Islam and Muslims, and unfairly draw a connection between these two and what happened at Ground Zero on Sept 11, 2001.

More importantly, they run counter to that profound American commitment to pluralism that has drawn immigrants -- including Muslims -- from all over the world since the Mayflower.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's and Obama's somewhat lonely but certainly courageous and unequivocal defence of the right of Park 51 to be built in the shadows of those "hallowed grounds" should be commended. It seems, however, that the issue is not whether the developers have a right to build the community centre with a mosque but whether it would be appropriate to do so at all. In other words: yes they can, but should they?

The argument is that just because the developers have a constitutional right to express their religious liberty does not mean it would be wise actually to do so in the face of majority objection. If the community that the centre is meant to serve does not want it there, and it entrenches the cleavages it is meant to close, its construction will serve little positive purpose and may instead exacerbate tensions against Muslims.

The issue is understandably emotive, given that it touches on religion and recalls the death and injury of thousands (including Muslims). The controversy has also intensified at an unfortunate time -- close to the ninth anniversary of the attacks, which coincides this year with Aidilfitri at the end of the month of Ramadan, and three months away from the congressional elections in November.

It is no surprise that political rhetoric on this issue has now appeared on the campaign trail.

Perhaps the project might have been more acceptable to the public had a collaborative interfaith proposal been forwarded from the beginning. It might even have avoided all controversy had it simply restored the Burlington Coat Factory there.

Ultimately, however, there are valuable lessons in this debate for Malaysia, as another multi-ethnic, multi-faith country.

First, any profession of social pluralism must be underpinned by an unyielding commitment to upholding the constitutional guarantees afforded to all citizens. Doing so not only acknowledges the position of every citizen as an integral part of the nation but also honours the diversity that should be its strength.

Second, a commitment to social pluralism must be forged and led, in word and in deed, at the leadership level. For political, community and religious leaders, what this means in practice is rising above divisive politics to defend the constitutionally guaranteed rights of all citizens.

It means resisting the manipulation of ethnic or religious issues for political mileage and communal interests. It also means braving the political controversies that may follow from taking a strategic national stand rather than a short-term communal one.

Third, where the assertion of constitutionally guaranteed rights clashes with public sensitivities, the rule of law should uphold the former and the principles of good governance should moderate the latter. This means that whereas these rights should always be preserved in principle, the wisdom of exercising them at all costs should be tempered and guided by context as well as considerations of equity, inclusiveness and, above all, a genuine respect for others.

Finally, a nation that is able to confront tough questions about its diversity is not necessarily headed for chaos and anarchy. Tensions among communities of different ethnicities and faiths in a rapidly changing world are only to be expected. But a society that is able to pause in that blur of confusion to ask itself what kind of nation it wants to be -- and proceeds to act pragmatically rather than emotionally -- is a society capable of maturing beyond merely tolerating to genuinely accepting, even embracing, the "other" as part of the nation.

No country is perfect. Even the most developed democracies will engage in difficult debates about their identity. The sooner we realise that national identity can never be a zero-sum game among communities, the quicker we will progress in our long road towards meaningful national unity.

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