

Who's a moderate voice? Hard to say

BY YANG RAZALI KASSIM
& MUHAMMAD HANIFF
HASSAN
For The Straits Times

MORE than three years after Sept 11, Muslims are still being told that the voices of moderation among them are not being sufficiently heard.

The "moderate Muslims", as these voices are usually referred to, have been urged to stop being the silent majority and to speak out more forcefully against extremism.

Do not be surprised if many Muslims the world over are starting to feel fatigued by the incessant calls to denounce every act of violence and terrorism — something which they believe they are already doing.

What is more, some are especially discomfited that "others" — meaning people from outside the Muslim community — have entered the fray by "taking sides" in the so-called moderate-radical divide.

To begin with, the label "moderate Muslim" is itself an ambiguous phrase. A "moderate" in one's perspective may not necessarily be a moderate in the eyes of others. Indeed, this definitional issue needs to be resolved first before a meaningful assessment can be made as to whether the "moderate Muslims" have been speaking up against extremism.

Specifically, the questions of who the moderates are and what precisely is meant by "moderation" have to be answered as a necessary first step.

Conversely, defining the radicals can be an elusive exercise. The truth is, making a pristine distinction between what is "moderate" and what is "radical" is difficult because in reality there is no such neat dichotomy.

The Muslim community and political leaders the world over behave in ways that defy easy categorisation: On certain issues, they can be "moderate" and "progressive", but on others they can be conservative, sectarian or even radical.

Thus, a sophisticated, subtle approach is needed when attempting to characterise Islamic scholars, leaders or groups.

For instance, terrorist acts perpetrated by radical Islamic groups, while repugnant, are fuelled ultimately not merely by the extremism of a few but also the broader grievances of Muslims in general. Examples would be the Israel-Palestine conflict or the Iraq war. No surprise then that one can often find serious Is-

lamic scholars whose views seemingly coincide with those of the extremists on some issues.

It is unhelpful to question a Muslim scholar's commitment to combating extremism and terrorism just because some of his views are deemed objectionable.

A more appropriate approach to evaluating the degree to which a scholar is "moderate" is to do so holistically, by looking at his views, opinions and works on a range of issues, instead of judging him on the basis of a single issue.

In Singapore, the Association of Ulama and Religious Teachers (Pergas) has held a convention on the issue of moderate Muslims. It has published a book on it and holds workshops and lectures to guide the Muslim community on the matter. But it is yet unclear if "others" outside the community appreciate these efforts of the moderate Muslims in the country.

TWO-WAY STREET

Perhaps the time has come for a new level of engagement between the outside world and "moderate Muslims" — as defined by the Muslim world itself. In defining the moderate Muslims, the community should not be indifferent to, or totally disregard, the views of "the others". One should seek to understand so as to be understood.

In the final analysis, this issue turns on the question of trust and confidence. At a global level, trust cannot be established when Western powers continue to support, and are seen as supporting, authoritarian or autocratic governments in Muslim countries whilst simultaneously preaching democracy and human rights.

Global Muslim confidence in the good faith of the West cannot be maintained if such double standards are practised.

It is not lost on thinking Muslims everywhere that former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was supported by major Western powers until he was deemed to have outlived his usefulness.

Western states may justify these inconsistencies on the basis of realpolitik, but to Muslims at the receiving end of authoritarian regimes propped up by the West, such inconsistencies breed the generalised resentment that in some cases becomes transmuted into terrorism.

What is worse, Muslims are increasingly aware that those who

can only be called radical non-Muslims are seeking to capture the agenda defining Muslim/non-Muslim relations.

These radical non-Muslims cast doubts on Islam by portraying it as either inherently problematic or incompatible with democracy and modernity. They also anticipate an "inevitable" clash between Islam and the West. Proponents of this view deride the very notion of "moderate Muslims", while dismissing commentators who view Islam as capable of reform as "apologists" or even "relativists".

Some radical non-Muslims even urge the United States not to press authoritarian Muslim states like Egypt to undertake political liberalisation, for fear of allowing greater space for the participation of political extremists.

This is pure folly because the Turkish case, for example, has demonstrated that political liberalisation may be one way to "domesticate" political radicals.

Trust between the Muslim world and "The Rest", in other words, cannot be achieved only by countering extremist Islamic ideology or promoting "moderates" Muslims.

Countering the preconceptions and unconsciously held prejudices of non-Muslims and Westerners towards Muslims and Islam is also needed.

Perhaps the time has come for a new level of engagement between the outside world and "moderate Muslims" — as defined by the Muslim world itself.

Still, in defining the moderate Muslims, the community should

not be indifferent to, or totally disregard, the views of "the others". One should seek to understand so as to be understood.

Sometimes, insightful comments can come from those outside a particular religious tradition. After all, coming to grips with defining the "moderate", "radical" or "extremist" is not just a problem confronting the Muslim community.

A similar debate has been going on in other religions, as manifested in the criticisms of evangelical Christians, the role of Opus Dei in the Catholic Church and the fundamentalism of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

It is through constructive engagement, driven by a sincere desire to understand each other's anxieties, hopes and aspirations, that the Muslims and the rest of the world may in the end become more enlightened, making the world a more peaceful place.

Yang Razali Kassim is a senior fellow and Muhammad Haniff Hassan a research analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.