

# Towards closer multi-religious ties

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — The Barisan Nasional, now in power in Sabah, is determined to establish closer rapport among the multi-religious people in the State, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said contrary to some propaganda, the Barisan was not out to convert people to Islam but "to rule and rule well" and to effect positive changes for the people's benefit.

He said that in line with the national philosophy, the Government would leave the people to follow religions of their own choice.

Dr Mahathir said this in his reply to a question by the resident scholar at the Islamic Centre of Southern California, Los Angeles, Professor Dr Fathi Othman, in a question-and-answer session after opening the building of the Institute of Islamic Understanding (Ikim) here.

Fathi said Malaysia's efforts in assimilating Islamic values among the multi-religious society were being closely followed by Muslims from other countries and wanted to know how the Government had dealt with the situation, especially in Sabah.

Dr Mahathir replied that certain people in Sabah tended to "wield power wrongly" in the past and



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had tried to convert everybody to Islam, against the advice of the Federal Government.

"There have been cases when the same person was converted three times over," he said, adding that it was actually not religious, but "political necessity".

"Now that we are back on the saddle, we told them to leave the people alone. Even if they are non-Muslims we cannot be unfair to them," he said.

Another participant of the Conference on Islam and Tolerance which was held yesterday in conjunction with the opening of the building, had asked Dr Mahathir to comment on religious polarisation at institutes of higher learning in the country.

The participant, Dr Abdul Aziz Azimullah, said the students had been "clustering" among themselves and refused to mix with those of other religions and this, he said, was unhealthy as they were future leaders.

To this, Dr Mahathir said the Government was aware of the problem and the exist-

ence of certain groups of people who promoted intolerance among these students.

He said the situation arose as some people tried to enforce rigidity in Islam when there was actually a great deal of flexibility in the religion.

He said in most cases, the students would modify their ways once they entered the real world.

The Prime Minister hopes Ikim would find a solution to change the misconception.

Professor of religion and international affairs and the director of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding: History and International Affairs, Georgetown University, Dr John L. Esposito asked Dr Mahathir to single out Malaysia's major achievement with regard to Islam and tolerance.

Dr Mahathir said the fact that the country could maintain peace and stability, and that the multi-racial and multi-religious people could live together was quite an achievement.

He said such a situation

might not be found in several other countries with plural society.

He said in Malaysia there was once a great deal of tension among the multi-racial and multi-religious people but the situation had improved a lot as the people, with the advice of the Government, realised that animosity did not pay.

To a question by the director of Goethe Institute, Dr Matthias Rick, on who had really played the role in enhancing tolerance among Malaysians, Dr Mahathir said that it was contributed by all Malaysians as a whole.

He said the Government also did not tolerate any attempt to stir racial hatred and would use its "weapon" to detain those responsible for it.

"But the beauty is that we are so tolerant that some of those detained ended up being ministers and deputy ministers," he said to loud applause and laughter.

Replying to another question on the difficulties to set up places of worship in some places, Dr Mahathir said the people should appreciate the fact that the Government was tolerant and allowed freedom of worship.

He said the matters concerning religions were sensitive and therefore had to be tackled with sensitivity.