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Mahathir-Islam

MAHATHIR SAYS ISLAM IS A MISUNDERSTOOD RELIGION

By: Wan A Hulaimi

OXFORD, April 16 (Bernama)-- The Muslim majority in Malaysia have proven that they are capable of living and working with non-Muslims to create a united and progressive nation, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

But, he said, the West and their media have refused to recognise this as an example of the best teaching of Islam because it would not fit in with their image of Islam as a 'fundamentalist religion'.

To the prejudiced Westerner, the ability of Muslims in Malaysia to live in harmony with the followers of other faiths in the country was not in keeping with the teaching of Islam, but an aberration from the character of the faith, he added.

Dr Mahathir said this in his address on the theme of 'Islam -- The Misunderstood Religion' before a gathering of scholars, diplomats and students at Rhodes South here.

He said they (the Westerners) keep on asking about fundamentalism in Malaysia and when told that there were really no Islamic fundamentalists of the kind they described, they rejected the claim.

In looking at the position of Islam in the world today, Dr Mahathir adopted a broad critical approach which looked at the perception of Islam from the viewpoint of Muslims and non-Muslims seeing faults in both.

"Islam is indeed a misunderstood religion. Such is the misunderstanding and the prejudice against it that Muslims and non-Muslims alike often regard it as an impediment, as a barrier to good successful relations between Muslim and non-Muslims and even between Muslims and Muslims.

"Both regard this religion that brought greatness to the Arabs and built a very progressive empire as being responsible for everything bad that happened between Muslims and non-Muslims," he said.

After spending the earlier part of his speech to explain the onerous task of Quranic interpretation by Muslim scholars or ulamas, and how the differing interpretations led to many schisms, Dr Mahathir repeatedly reminded the audience that while the words of the Quran could not be changed, the "ulamas" themselves were not prophets and could themselves be 'quite wrong' in their interpretations.

He himself did not claim to be an expert or an "ulama" -- an Islamic scholar

-- but it would be fatal for him to say that he was not qualified as many who spoke on Islam and claimed to be "ulama" were also not qualified, he said.

"I do claim that I have as much right to speak on Islam as many others who speak on the subject," Dr Mahathir added.

He went on to say that although there was only one Quran -- the specific or 'Muhkamat' and the general or 'Mutashabihat', and this latter category was intended to provide guidance in different situations and for untold problems that Muslims had to face not only during the life of the Prophet, but for all times.

Again he stressed the fallibility of the learned Imams and the scholars while also acknowledging that they were indispensable to the understanding of Islam.

Dr Mahathir then underlined the dangers of blind acceptance.

"Unfortunately, there is a tendency to treat the pronouncements of the 'ulamas' as infallible. There are any number of people who claimed to be

learned in Islam and call themselves 'ulama'. Some of these are clearly charlatans and people with vested interest, including of course politicians with very worldly personal ambitions.

"If all these people are considered to be the successors of the Prophet and are qualified and infallible in their interpretations of Islam, then it is easy to see why there is confusion and misunderstanding of the teaching of Islam," he said.

Dr Mahathir said some misinterpretations of Islam were 'trivialities' which did Muslims no real harm besides retarding their progress in a fast changing world, but of more serious nature were "fatwas" relating to relations within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Citing Quranic verses, Dr Mahathir emphasised that the feuding between Muslim sects and Muslim nations was contrary to the teachings of Islam, and was reminiscent of the pre-Islamic days and was not in keeping with Islamic teachings.

He said: "There is a misunderstanding among Muslims regarding the teachings of Islam on relations with the non-Muslims. The Quran clearly stated that the Christians are the friends of the Muslims. Indeed, when the first few converts to Islam were persecuted by the Quraish idol-worshippers, they were advised by the Prophet to seek refuge in the Christian Abyssinia. The Christian King of Abyssinia protected the Muslim refugees so well that attempts by the Quraish to extradite them failed."

As regard the Jews, he said the Zionists and their supporters who advocated violence against the Muslims must be regarded as enemies, "but when they sue for peace they should get positive response from the Muslims".

Although Dr Mahathir was critical about the conduct of Muslims whose behaviour led to the misinterpretation of their own religion and to fanatical behaviour, he reserved his strongest words for what he saw as the misconception of Islam by non-Muslims -- in particular Jews and Christians.

"The misunderstanding of Islam by the West today is perhaps at its peak. Forgetting that Christianity too had experienced extreme aberrations as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition and the burning of the witches in Europe and America, the West has made aberrations in the practice of the Muslim faith by a minority of Muslims as the true manifestation of Islam," he observed.

He illustrated this by citing examples of the Oklahoma bombing in the United States and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

"The immediate reaction to the bombing of a government building in Oklahoma was that it was another Muslim terrorist act. When it was discovered that it was not a Muslim who did it, the fact that the bomber was a Christian was ignored. It was not described as Christian terrorism. The bitter fighting in Northern Ireland involves differences between two Christian sects, but at no time have the bombings, killings and maiming by the IRA and their Protestant rivals been termed Christian terrorism or Catholic or Protestant terrorism," he said.

Drawing the attention of his audience to the events on their doorsteps, Dr Mahathir said Europe refused to describe the ethnic cleansing of Slav Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina by Christian Serbs as genocide.

"Supposing, just supposing, it was the Muslim Bosnian Slavs who had the weapons and the numbers, and they were supported by Muslim countries and they had committed the atrocities, the world would be screaming Muslim terrorism from the mountain tops and NATO would have moved in and ended the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina in no time."

He said the Muslims now bore the brunt of Western prejudice which had its roots in the medieval history of Europe.

The attitude towards Muslims and Islam was manifested in very painful

ways for the Muslims when whole nations were isolated, blockaded and punished for the faults of a few, he said.

Dr Mahathir concluded that there were two courses of action open to remove the problem of misconception of Islami: The Muslims should go back to the Quran and the genuine "hadiths" (traditions of the Prophet) and to study and interpret them in the context of the present world; and the non-Muslims should appreciate the problems the Muslims had in trying to adjust to modern changes.

Earlier, the Prime Minister had tea at the Centre for Islamic Studies here where he viewed an Islamic exhibition and was presented with a souvenir plaque.

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