

06/09/1997

Malays need to reinvent themselves for the next millennium

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IT was a speech that contained a combination of things - a challenge to Malays to create a culture of strength and rise in a rapidly progressing world, an inspiring reflection of past glories and a foreboding of what will be if the Malays dwelt on their achievements.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in an address to open the party's general assembly yesterday, spoke at length about the importance of Malays and the ummah changing their mindset - to give priority to substance and content and not form and symbol.

"By all counts, the message is not new. But this time there is a twist, so to speak. He is giving us a global view and in his style and character, an intellectual and a more profound perspective and analysis on how we can rise and be strong," said a delegate.

It may not have seemed an exciting speech. But, said a Wanita delegate, that was irrelevant.

"It is a speech that makes us think about our future from now, from today. He is indeed concerned, as he always is, about our future, about how we will face the challenges in a world that is expanding and progressing.

"We have to change. We have to discard values that will only cause us to regress. And that is exciting and inspiring," she said.

Dr Mahathir, throughout his speech held to one theme - for the Malays to be their own masters, which would not mean becoming a lesser Malay nor Muslim.

Learn from the mistakes of other Muslim countries and not allow ourselves to be backward or we will be a race to be fooled, humiliated and oppressed by foreign powers.

Umno, he said, had for 50 years struggled to regain and redeem the dignity and integrity of the Malays. Its success in this had been helped by the adoption of a democratic political system in a multi-ethnic and religious society.

Political stability has undoubtedly benefited a young country that is trying hard to progress in a fast changing world dominated by a few powers or "masters".

What is vital now is to "defend" this economic success. And it is up to the Malays to do this. In fact, they should strive to be better and stronger to compete with developed countries.

"He is saying that we can do it. Being a Muslim should not be an obstacle if only we are not preoccupied with trivial and insignificant things," said a delegate.

Dr Mahathir, speaking on religion, touched on an issue which he admitted was sensitive and would make many uncomfortable.

He disputed the belief that one is a lesser Muslim if one pursues knowledge other than that of religion.

He also spoke on the meaning and intention of certain requirements in Islam including the covering of the "aurat".

All these, he argued, must be looked at in-depth, in its meaning, intention and content during the time of enforcement and now.

"He is warning us that if Muslims merely look at the form, we will not be doing the right thing and address problems for which these (the requirements) were enforced," said a delegate from Johor.

Certainly, his thoughts and views go beyond mere rhetoric. They never

were rhetoric in the first place.

Dr Mahathir has spoken on delicate issues that should touch not only Malays and Muslims but also Malaysians who are gearing to meet the challenges of a new millennium.

It is up to the Malays to take up that challenge to change, to accept elements of the culture of developed countries and to create their own - consistent and reflective of a progressive race. Not one that is "half-progressed".

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