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Towards Islamic prosperity

THE economic challenge facing Islamic countries is not to live up to the rest of the world but to its own promise and potential. With potential foreign reserves of US\$1.24 trillion (US\$1 = RM2.51) and trade volume of US\$72 billion, the Islamic world would have had more impact on global trade and economy had governments of Muslim nations the will to initiate a more cohesive strategy to promote cooperation among themselves. Instead, and despite belonging to a faith that propogates brotherhood and peace, the Islamic countries and governments fought one another, undermined their own peoples, and led the Islamic world to be viewed as a misfit in this modern day. The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) held together some of the political aspirations of some Islamic countries, but that is as far as it has gone and may ever go, although there were instances where it did not go as far as it could and should have.

If the setting up of the Developing Eight had drawn reservations from certain quarters, it was because of this popular misconception about Muslims and Islamic countries. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said, the view from outside is that Islamic countries do not have the ability to make any form of cooperation among them viable. In his address to the inaugural summit of the D-8 in Istanbul Sunday, the Prime Minister stressed that the grouping must show irrefutable results on a yearly basis if it wants to gain credibility. If it fails, then it should not make a pretence of being useful. It should fold up rather than hold meaningless meetings.

The challenge for the D-8 is for the eight countries to prove that they can enhance economic cooperation and trade ties among themselves. They have to prove this to themselves first, before they can even think about convincing other Islamic countries and governments that the Islamic world can be an economic powerhouse in the 21st century. As Dr Mahathir pointed out, in order to ensure success in its undertakings, the D-8 members must, individually, first secure internal political stability and a strong government. Without political stability, even the economically strong will become weak while the economically weak will become totally paralysed. If one member of the D-8 is not capable of ensuring political stability and a strong government, little can be achieved economically for that country. The other seven members will not be able to do much to promote trade and economic cooperation with that country.

The situation that the D-8 finds themselves in is not dissimilar to that of the Group of Fifteen (G-15), which was formed as a branch of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to promote economic and trade ties among developing countries. NAM, which is basically a political grouping like the OIC, was too large and diverse to be effective in encouraging cooperation among members. A smaller, more focussed group like the G-15 was seen as ideal and has, to date, proven to be a useful tool to promote the kind of cooperation and ventures never thought possible before. But even for the G-15, the road travelled has not been always smooth. The summit in New Delhi, India, had to be postponed in 1993 because of an insufficient quorum. This could have been construed as a lack of political will on the part of some members. Even now, despite having significantly boosted trade figures among G-15 members, the grouping is still very much dependent on the determination of a few members.

The road the D-8 will take could be as trying as the G-15, if not even

more, given the negative perception from the outside world. The inaugural summit in Istanbul last Sunday is no small step towards debunking the theory that Islamic countries cannot initiate and follow through a project for the benefit of the ummah. It is up to the eight governments to ensure that the grouping succeeds. If any of the eight cannot ensure domestic political stability and a strong government, it should quickly give way to others who can contribute more effectively. The scope for success may seem unlimited, but to see it through will require the members to go farther than any of them has gone in search of peace and prosperity.

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