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Mahathir-Religion

DON'T PRACTISE ISLAM IN SECLUSION, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 30 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it is imperative for Muslims in Malaysia to practise their religion not in seclusion but in full view of all people of the country irrespective of their faiths.

He said if Islam, as Malaysia's official religion, was mysterious and its practice was hidden there was bound to be suspicions and fear that the teachings of the official religion would be imposed on the followers of other religions.

"There would be fear that obstacles would be put in the way of other religions. There would be fear of forced conversions..," he said when opening the "International Conference of Religious Studies: Meeting the Millennium" at the Palace of the Golden Horses Hotel here today.

Dr Mahathir said that while non-Muslims should not be required to participate in any religious rituals, they should not be denied their presence when such rituals are carried out.

Although Malaysia is governed by pre-dominantly Malay Muslim government there has been no attempt to oppress the non-Muslims, he said.

"The government of Malaysia is very tolerant and shows respect for the religious observances of the different religious groups. No one can say that by being so it is not Islamic," the prime minister said.

The three-day conference is organised by the Kuala Lumpur Chihui Pang Association for the Study of Religions and the University of Malaya's Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

The conference, carrying the theme "Religions in the 21st Century: A Civilisational Perspective", is aimed at promoting world peace and inter-religion understanding of the 21st century through academic exchange and study of religions.

About 500 local and international participants from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Singapore, among others, are attending the conference.

Dr Mahathir said religion was still very relevant in Malaysia's multi-religious society.

"To ignore it or to side-line it would be unwise. A totally secular society cannot be created in Malaysia. The religions of the people must play their role," he said.

In other countries where the official religion was also the religion of almost every citizen, the freedom to practise other religions was not of great consequence, he said.

"But in Malaysia where Islam is the religion of only 60 per cent of the people, not only is freedom to practise other religions very meaningful and important but it implies an acceptance of tolerance and accommodation on the part of the majority Muslims," he said.

Muslims in Malaysia were very fortunate that the recitation of the "doa" or prayers before any event has been accepted by everyone and that each could pray according to his or her faith as the Muslim prayers were recited, he said.

Another phenomenon that could be seen in Malaysia was the joint celebration of religious festivals, he said.

The Malaysian practice of holding open house during religious festivals have brought people of different faiths together, he said.

"Without doubt this has brought about greater understanding if not each other's religions, at least of each other's culture," he said.

Dr Mahathir said even more interesting was the breaking of fast during Ramadan which hotels and restaurants prepared food for the Muslims to break their fast.

"But non-Muslims join in, respectfully refraining from having their buffet meals until their Muslim brothers break their fast," he said.

While the diversity of religious practices in other countries have resulted in violent clashes, in Malaysia, they resulted in bringing followers of different religions together, Dr Mahathir said.

Malaysia's remarkable unity in diversity was the result of the openness in the practice of the different religions and in particular Islam, the religion of the majority and the national official religion, he added.

-- BERNAMA

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