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`Religion essential in maintaining harmony'

Fadzil Ghazali

MALAYSIA believes that religion plays an important role in maintaining harmony among the people, especially in a country which is multi-racial and multi-cultural, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

However, it is important that certain aspects of religion that might have negative consequences are recognised and safeguards put in place, he said when officiating at an international conference of religious studies in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

For example, there are bound to be suspicions and fear if a religion is not fully understood by people of other faiths.

"There would be fear that the teachings of one religion would be imposed on the followers of other religions. There would be fear that obstacles would be introduced to discourage practising other religions. There would be fear of forced conversions," he said.

In the case of Malaysia, it is therefore imperative that Muslims practise their religion not in seclusion but in full view of all the people of this country, Dr Mahathir said.

"While non-Muslims should not be required to participate in any Islamic rituals, they should also not be denied access," he added.

Although Malaysia is governed by a pre-dominantly Muslim Government, there has been no attempt to oppress the non-Muslims. The Government is tolerant and has always shown respect for the different religious observances of the people, he noted.

"Of late, however, we have seen some aberrations but these are exceptions which actually prove the rule. A country with a Muslim majority in power can ensure fairness and justice for everyone irrespective of religion or race."

Religion is, and will remain for a long time, relevant to the Malaysian society, he said, and to ignore or sideline it would be unwise.

Dr Mahathir said Islam has been adopted and accepted as the official religion of Malaysia but other religions continue to be freely practised, which is not always the case in other countries.

"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 also reflects a high degree of tolerance and accommodation on the part of the majority Muslims."

Indeed, spiritual fortitude has helped Malaysians to face and overcome the 1997-98 economic and financial crises.

"We were able to face the material problems of our life calmly, to understand them and to overcome them," he added.

"Religion according to Karl Marx is the opium of life. But religions have survived and will continue to survive, long after Marx and his ideology have been relegated to the history books," Dr Mahathir said.

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