

06/10/2000

Dr M's depiction of the state of Muslims provokes much discussion

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AS it turned out, not many Muslim leaders, especially heads of government, meet Muslim intellectuals and leaders of the community when they visit London. This was revealed by a scholar at a dialogue between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and intellectuals at a dinner at the Muslim College on Tuesday.

The Prime Minister was invited to address the group at the college, established in 1987 to enable graduate students to pursue a variety of courses ranging from theology and philosophy to Islamic history and civilisation. Also offered are courses on Islamic jurisprudence while there are tie-ups with other universities in London and elsewhere.

The prime mover of the college is Dr M.A. Zaki Badawi, an Egyptian scholar who came from Cairo's Al-Azhar University, that famous institution in the Islamic world.

Dr Mahathir was asked to speak on the future of Muslims in the new century, a topic which he did with ease. It must be recalled that the Prime Minister had in April 1996 addressed an almost similar gathering at Oxford University's Centre for Islamic Studies.

At that gathering attended by dons, lecturers, students and prominent members of the Muslim community, Dr Mahathir articulated, to a standing ovation at the end of it, on "Islam - the Misunderstood Religion".

It was, many believed, a thought-provoking insight into the Muslim world, an insight many would debate and argue endlessly but few would mention openly as Dr Mahathir did.

At the Muslim College, the Prime Minister spoke of a Muslim diaspora, painting a "sad scenario" where many Muslims are forced to live in exile, made persona non-grata in their own countries, and whose skills and wealth contributed to the development of their adopted countries.

This is indeed true. Muslim businessmen, industrialists, bankers, scholars and educationists are found all over the world helping to enrich their adopted fatherland. As minorities, they are unable to become a collective force to promote Islam and the Muslim cause.

While Dr Mahathir may not have made a point to meet Muslim intellectuals and professionals on his trips abroad, the two occasions - Oxford in 1996 and the Muslim College this week - which this writer had the opportunity to be present were well-received and provoked much discussion.

Dr Mahathir's fear that the biggest enemies of Islam are the Muslims themselves has not changed over the years.

The opposite, perhaps, may be true, the Prime Minister concluded. Obsession with narrow interpretations of Islam and a growing indifference among ulamas to be involved in mainstream social activities are being seen everywhere.

Imams and other mosque officials were among those present at the dinner address. Dr Mahathir's plain speaking led to more discussion on the matter, with several diners going up to the Prime Minister to seek his elaboration and ask more questions.

A student leader (not a Malaysian) asked Dr Mahathir to explain the sacking of his former deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and the sodomy charges brought against him.

Giving the same explanation as he had in Malaysia, the Prime Minister said: "If it was a simple case of wanting to remove him, I could have done so, citing political and/or policy differences as the reason. But this was

not so.

"Malaysia simply could not have someone like that as the next Prime Minister."

Later, the student leader met and had his picture taken with the Prime Minister, setting a rather friendly constructive engagement between them. Whether or not the student leader accepts the explanation is another matter, but it is important for him to also obtain information about the case from other sources and, in this case, from the Prime Minister himself.

An Iranian scholar later stood up to voice his concern over Dr Mahathir's not-too-optimistic view about the future of Muslims in the new century.

In fact, he felt that the negative perceptions of Islam among some countries were caused by "a small group not representative" of Islam and urged the Malaysian Government to help "educate" the rest of the Muslim world in ways that would promote Islam as a progressive force.

But Dr Zaki appeared to have the last word for the night. Having earlier given a complimentary account of the Prime Minister's contributions to the cause of Islam, listing the International Islamic University in Gombak as the sole institution that still works, the college principal said:

"Malaysia under Dr Mahathir has blazed the way for other Islamic countries to follow. While pursuing science and technology seriously and successfully, Malaysia has remained true to Islam.

"Its economic policies have enabled Muslims to have a bigger stake in business, trade and industry.

"Contrary to the predictions by the so-called pundits that Malaysia had taken a wrong turn in the 1997 economic crisis, Dr Mahathir has proven everyone wrong, the International Monetary Fund/World Bank among them.

"Since he has achieved so much for his country, I must say that I can't share his gloomy, pessimistic scenario of the future of Muslims and Islam."

While such rhetoric may warm the heart, much remains whether the Islamic world at large can prove its worth by putting words into action.

Otherwise, as the Prime Minister said, a resurrection of the Muslim Civilisation in the 21st century will be nothing more than a dream.

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