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Fulfilling our destiny

WE are our own worst enemies - this sums up best the state of affairs in the Muslim world today. This sentiment is reflected in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at the opening ceremony of the 27th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers.

It is an undeniable reality. Muslim nations are besieged by poverty, strife, squabbles and endless obsession with interpretations on petty issues of Islamic laws. Our rich legacy of Islamic intellectualism has been stultified by taqlid-minded religious scholars who manipulated the religion to suit their selfish whims and fancies. In the battlefield of life, the ummah is afflicted with the disease of defeatism and hence, we allow ourselves to be subjugated by Western powers, helplessly and mindlessly depending on them for political and economic security.

This pathetic state of affairs will surely persist unless we dare look into ourselves and summon enough gumption to change the present course of tide. Dr Mahathir is right in saying that "without unity and knowledge, Islamic nations risked being colonised by rich countries and turned into banana republics where the managers of the plantations are more powerful than the presidents of these nations".

Our future is indeed bleak. Consider that while we are all gathered here to discuss the plight of Muslim countries, the West is celebrating their new-found science of genomics - the first mapping of the human genetic code, a revelation of the first human draft of the human book of life. But what is the status quo of Muslims in the field of science and technology?

Some of our Muslim brethren cannot even avail themselves of Information Technology, let alone the benefits of industrialisation. Some cannot decipher the dangers lurking in globalisation, which is an euphemism for the domination of the rich over the poor. Some embrace the cries of Western ethocentricism - liberty, democracy, liberality - without realising better values are already embodied in Islam. At best, we become nostalgic about the Golden Age of Islam. But nostalgia produces a reduced vision of our Islamic legacy.

Whither the solution? Dr Mahathir points out that "the solution is with us and between us". We have to embrace unity and knowledge. Our cultural survival - nay, the sanctity of Islam - and the dynamic civilisational transformation of the ummah depends wholly on our capacity to master knowledge. Non-religious knowledge should not be condemned as secular. One of our greatest scholars, Ibn Arabi, said that, "Observation and reasoning (istidlal) is the foundation of acquired knowledge". But we have stopped thinking, wallowing instead in self-pity.

Surely science is the knowledge of God's essence. When human intellect is guided by faith, knowledge such as the deciphering of the human genetic code will bring us closer to Him. The way to fulfil our role as God's Vicegerents in this world is to master knowledge. As observed by Dr Mahathir, "By failing to develop the Muslim countries, by failing to defend them and the Muslim people, we are committing even greater sins which our personal devotion to the daily rituals of our faith will not absolve".

For the Muslims, a fresh breath of reality needs to be breathed deep however painful the coughing fit it may produce. Let us not fail ourselves this time around.

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