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Future of Muslims in New Century

SPEECH by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at the meeting with Muslim intellectuals and professionals in London on Tuesday. I AM particularly honoured to be given the opportunity to address this august gathering of Muslim intellectuals and professionals in London here today on the subject of the future of the Muslims.

The new century is essentially a point in time based on the Christian Gregorian calendar. But it should not stop us from using it as a milestone to evaluate the situation of the Muslims, and to look into their future.

The beginning of the 21st century in fact should give us cause for re-examining ourselves and the direction that we are taking.

Looking back at history, when the world entered the second millennium, the Christians were expecting Doomsday while the Muslims were on top of the world. They were the super-power, their armies considered as the best that there were, their rulers doubled up as leaders of the global community, their cities the proud centres of commerce and learning, and their scientists and scholars respected as true men of knowledge, ranking with the greatest minds of the West.

The Islamic world was the hub of political, economic and social activities then.

Ibn Sina or Avicenna was the world's foremost physician. Ibn al-Haitham or Alhazen was a great Muslim physicist and physician who was a pioneer in the science of optics that went on to become the basis of space science.

The second millennium was also the time of Al-Biruni, perhaps the best astronomer that ever lived. In the meantime, the surgeon of al-Zahrawi was performing wonders in the field of surgery. And I can go on and on.

But where are the Muslim greats of our age? We seem incapable of producing them. Yes, we have a few political leaders but they have not built great nations, much less, great civilisations.

They are known mainly for the controversies they attract and it is unlikely that they will be remembered as the great Muslim scholars of the past are remembered and revered by.

If we look at the decline and fall of the two great Muslim empires, we cannot help but see not so much the crushing forces outside but the rot inside.

From the time of the Khawarij insurrections against Saidina Ali and Muawiyah to our times, the so-called 100 per cent Muslim purists have never ceased to harangue and to condemn the mainstream majority for not being Muslim enough or not Muslim at all.

Even Saidina Ali was described as an infidel by these fanatics and violence was mounted against him.

In the latter part of the history of Islam, as soon as a Muslim community or state tried to develop and to acquire the knowledge and skill with which to strengthen itself and to protect the Muslim ummah, religious controversy over what was being done would rage within it and the minds and energies of the community would be deflected towards defending so-called Muslim progressives against the so-called Muslim purists.

Even if the enemies of Islam are at the gates, the Muslims must first attend to the conflicts within their community, conflicts which they could never resolve.

The polemics never end. Both sides and sometimes many others would join in and quote numerous authorities, from the Quran and the Hadith and the

writings and interpretations and the sayings of numerous learned ulamas of the past and present.

But no matter what authority is quoted, not even when the Quran is quoted, there will be no unanimity in acknowledging the correctness of anyone's interpretation and practice of Islam.

As the polemics rage on in formal and informal debates, in speeches and articles in the newspapers and magazines and now in the electronic media and the Internet, the defences of the Muslims and their states, the defence of the ummah against their real detractors and enemies are neglected.

In fact, in their obsession with their differences, the Muslims often seek the help of their avowed infidel enemies in order to overcome their Muslim opponents or enemies. And invariably they put themselves under obligation to their non-Muslim allies.

1440 years after the Hijrah, we are still debating whether we should lop off the heads of the apostates. Never mind the fact that in practical terms we will not be able to execute the apostates. But the debate must go on and we must take sides and glare at each other, accusing the other as being infidels, not true Muslims, while we ourselves are accused of being the same, or infidels.

If both sides are right as they claim they are, then there are no Muslims in this world. If one side is right then the Muslim population will be reduced by half.

And because we are busy with our endless debates, our countries regress, are unable to cope with the changes around us, and are dominated by others. All the while everyone of us will blame the Orientalists who are bent on misleading us about our religion.

It never occurred to anyone to just ignore the Orientalists. But I suspect that even if there are no Orientalists we would still be debating and disagreeing with each other over the minutiae of our religion.

When the industrial age came we hardly noticed it, much less adjust and take advantage of it in order to maintain the strength and the development level of our countries.

Where before Muslims were the inventors and the producers of industrial goods, we were barely able to understand large scale manufacturing in order to cater to mass demand. We depended entirely on the products of the non-Muslims for our defence needs even at the time when we were fighting them.

We are still breathless as we try from far behind to catch up with the industrialised nations. But now we find that they have moved from the Industrial Age into the Information Age.

Now we find we cannot hide behind our borders any more. We cannot stop the cross-border flows of capital, of business and of information. Our faith, our beliefs are now being corrupted by the filth that spews forth from the Internet and the electronic media.

And still the debate on what is truly Islamic and who is a true Muslim goes on.

In Malaysia a fanatical group which managed to convince themselves that by reciting certain verses of the Quran they could become invulnerable and invisible decided to launch an armed insurrection against what they declared is an infidel Government. At first sight it looked silly but it is actually a symptom of the malady which inflicts the Muslim ummah for centuries.

Malaysia had been independent for 43 years - not a very long time for a country. During that time we had managed to keep the country peaceful despite the explosive mix of Malays, Chinese and Indians each professing incompatible religions.

The Malays who formed the majority are Muslims, the Chinese are Buddhists, while the Indians are Hindus. Strictly speaking they cannot live together.

The Muslim Malays abhor pork which the Chinese love, while the Indians do not eat beef which the Malays love. But somehow we manage to sit at the same table to eat, each sensitive to the sensitivities of the others. Muslim leadership achieved this.

The same predominantly Muslim Government was able to develop the country at a rapid rate. From a country which depended entirely on rubber and tin, Malaysia has become the biggest producer and exporter of microchips, refrigerators and air conditioners.

Eighty-two per cent of its exports are now made up of manufactured goods. And it has become the 17th biggest trading nation in the world.

We are a democracy and we hold elections every five years, elections in which opposition candidates can win and even capture the Government of some of the States.

But the Muslim dominated National Front coalition of 14 parties has been returned as the national Government every time since independence.

The most aggressive opposition party is the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party or Pas. We thought no one would be taken in by their claim that voting for the party ensures heaven in the afterlife; that they and Islam are one and the same thing, that we the other Muslims, the majority in the country, are all infidels (kafirs).

But they persisted. They carried out a hate campaign beginning in the kindergarden right through to the universities and managed to instil so much hate against the coalition that they made a lot of headway in the last election. Two of the States fell to them and already signs of regression are being seen.

Malaysia's detractors abroad are happily encouraging the disruptive activities of this so-called Islamic Party, obviously for reasons which have nothing to do with the proclaimed Islamic struggle of this party.

We would like to ignore them except that an increasing number now believe that the Malaysian Government is an infidel Government. The extremist Al-Ma'unah group, which recently mounted an armed attempt to overthrow the Government, is a direct off-shoot of the Islamic Party and believes the infidel Government must be overthrown by force.

We are prepared to contest in fair elections but armed insurrection is another thing altogether. It would seem that the generally peaceful Malays are not immune to the kind of religious hatred that had bedevilled most Muslim countries and prevented them from making progress.

Muslims are forever looking for an excuse to fight holy wars or jihad. They are and they never have been too particular about the religious legitimacy of their jihad and the weakening of Muslim countries.

The main thing is to fight and to be willing to die, to become a syahid, a martyr who had sacrificed his life for Islam and will gain a place for himself in heaven.

That his self-service has contributed nothing to the struggle of the Muslims does not matter. That their actions have set back the struggle of the Muslim ummah by decades and centuries even, does not matter. It is the quest for martyrdom that is important.

The Muslims have many enemies from among the non-Muslims but these are not often the target of these would-be martyrs. Their principal targets are usually the Muslims themselves.

Allah forbids Muslims from killing other Muslims. But this injunction is easily overcome by declaring that their Muslim targets have become infidels or kafir for one reason or another.

Never mind that these people have faithfully followed the injunctions of

Islam, have performed all the religious rituals and lived the life of Muslims; they would still be labelled kafir because they are not 100 per cent true Muslims in the eyes of these fanatics.

The Muslim Governments are invariably accused of not being Islamic and the hatred of the people aroused against the Government.

No matter what the Government does to comply with the tenets of Islam, it would still be not Islamic enough. It would still be a heathen Government by apostates.

Since the Government is made up of heathens then killing them and their supporters would not be against the teachings of Islam.

Shades of the Khawarij fanaticism is to be found in their arguments, the Khawarij who had even labelled Saidina Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam, the nephew of the Prophet (s.a.w) who had fought alongside Rasulullah in their wars against the pagans, as an infidel.

These self-styled holy warriors have killed more Muslims than the non-Muslim enemies of Islam. They have disrupted Muslim Governments, preventing them from making any progress towards fully developed states, towards rebuilding the Muslim civilisation and regaining the glory that was Islam before.

They have mounted attacks against non-Muslim targets sometimes but the effect of their attacks is minimal. A few innocent people are killed, some physical damage is done to some buildings or aircraft and that is about all. Have they gained anything? Have they frightened their so-called enemies into submission?

No, not at all. All they have done is to make life more miserable for more Muslims to create more hatred and condemnation of the Muslims, actually to prevent the progress and advancement of the Muslims and their countries.

Their little successes have only retarded the rehabilitation of the Muslim ummah. The sad thing is that they are going to carry out their vengeance, their feud into the future too.

There will always be recruits for their ranks drawn by the preachings of religious leaders who are unable to appreciate the reality of the situation, to appreciate the worthlessness of their puny attacks, to understand the damage that they do to the Muslim cause.

And so what will be the future of the Muslims in the New Century? Frankly I am not too optimistic. We are in the 15th Century of the Hijrah. We know that during the 15th Century of the Christian era they were busily burning witches and assorted religious delinquents at the stake. All and sundry were being accused of not being Christians or Christian enough and were summarily executed.

There was a massive flight to the new world, to seek freedom from religious persecution.

Today we are seeing a Muslim diaspora. In the Americas, there are Muslims who have fled their homelands. Many are persona non-grata in their own countries.

As with the Christian refugees, the Muslims who left their countries are talented people. They are still good Muslims. They practise the teachings of Islam.

But they can never hope to make the land of their adoption a Muslim land. They will always feel alienated from the majority who would be against them in many ways.

Many of them have done well in their adopted land. And they have, whether they want or not, contributed to the wealth and skills of the land they had settled in. And by the same token, they have deprived their own homeland, their Muslim homeland, of their talents and their skills.

It is a pity. It is a pity because their homelands need them more than

their land of adoption. But if they stay back they will not have the opportunity to make use of the talents and skills that they have.

Their own countries are poor. The facilities for working, for research and development are not there. The money is not there. But most of all their work is not appreciated. They might even be accused of not being Islamic, even if their foreheads speak of their religious piety.

I know that many who have left their homeland to seek a more hospitable life care a lot about their homeland. They would like to help, to go back and help. But for a variety of reasons they cannot. And so, very few would return.

Some, sad to say, may even forsake their religion in order to become fully accepted in their new society.

This is a sad scenario of the future of the Muslims. But it need not be.

If I may I would like to touch on the Malaysian Muslims' approach towards ensuring the recovery and progress of the Muslims. Firstly we believe it will take time, decades or centuries even.

But we are quite patient. And so we try to ensure peace and stability in our country. We try to set up a good effective administration, able to implement policies and development carefully planned by a popularly elected Government.

We want Muslims to be well educated in all the arts and sciences and the technologies, without forgetting their knowledge and practice of their religion - Islam. We want them to be able to compete and to acquire wealth legitimately.

We want them to be spiritually ready to face the challenges in a hostile world. We want them not to succumb to emotion but to plan and strategise when faced with challenges.

We want them to be brave when facing their enemies, to know their strength and the weaknesses of the enemies and to plan to overcome the dangers in order to gain victory. We do not want them to throw themselves blindly against the enemy because they want to become martyrs to the cause of Islam.

We believe that if we can build up a rational Muslim nation, skilled in administration, in the sciences and technologies, in trade and industry, politically, socially and religiously stable, learned in all fields - then we can advance the true cause of Islam. This is our jihad.

That is what the Muslims which lead the Malaysian Government today believe in. Our non-Muslim colleagues are not opposed to this because we have demonstrated that a Muslim Government can be just and fair to non-Muslims without in any way disobeying the injunctions of Islam.

We had hoped that we would be able in a small way to show Muslims and Muslim countries the path to a Muslim renaissance, a Muslim resurrection. We had hoped that our little success would be acknowledged and recognised and used as a model.

We still think we can do this. But we are seeing in Malaysia the advance of the kind of intra-Muslim conflict which is likely to derail us.

We are seeing young educated professionals becoming obsessed by blind hatred of the people who had brought about their own upliftment, throwing in their lot with the fanatics, thinking more about a martyr's death and heaven for themselves, rather than the peace and recovery of the Muslim ummah and the Muslim civilisation.

I try very hard to be optimistic about the Muslims in the 21st century of the third millennium of the Christian Era. But I must admit that it is very difficult for me to be optimistic.

I find few Muslims understand reality. They live in a make-believe world where weakness is regarded as strength, where failures are regarded as successes.

After 1,400 years they clearly have failed to understand their really very simple religion, the religion that is not to be a burden to them. And so they will continue to argue and to debate and to disagree on the teachings of their religion, and in disagreeing they will fight and kill each other, unconsciously perhaps doing the work of their detractors and enemies.

I am sorry that I am unable to see the renaissance of the Muslim Civilisation in the 21st Century. We have not yet awakened to the realities of the Industrial Age, much less the Information Age.

A few of us have but we are too few and we are not in a position to do much. These few will effectively live in exile. More will be joining them with the passage of time.

I hope there are others who can show positively that the 21st Century will see the beginning of the return of the great Muslim Civilisation. I would like to be convinced by them, so I and the other Muslims may contribute whatever we can to the revival.

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