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ISNA must take a look at past history

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SOMETIME in the middle of this year two representatives from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) came to Kuala Lumpur and sought an appointment with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Their purpose: to extend an invitation to address its convention in Rosemont, Illinois on Sept 1.

No appointment had been made and it was through the good offices of one of the Prime Minister's aides that they managed to meet him.

The meeting which lasted more than half-an-hour was cordial and they extended the invitation which Dr Mahathir courteously accepted.

It is not everyday that one accepts an invitation to speak all the way in the US. Suddenly in late August the invitation was withdrawn through a letter addressed to the Malaysian Ambassador in Washington, Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Abdul Khalid.

The letter bore the signatures of Dr Muzammil H. Siddiqi and Dr Sayyid M. Syeed, President and Secretary General of ISNA. There was no such letter to Dr Mahathir who was at the time in London attending a conference, a follow-up to another in Maputo, Mozambique a few days earlier.

According to foreign news reports, ISNA had cancelled the invitation because "dozens and dozens" of its members were said to be unhappy over the recent Malaysian court verdict on former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Responding to the questions from journalists Dr Mahathir replied: "It is their right to invite and to withdraw the invitation. It clearly showed that they (ISNA) just listen to one side of the story and refuse to get the truth from the other side".

The contents of ISNA's letter to the Malaysian Ambassador have since appeared on a website. Some excerpts: "Your Excellency, we are confident that you are fully aware of the role of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) as a representative of Muslim Americans and Canadians from all walks of life.

"ISNA serves as a national umbrella organisation, embracing within its folds community as well as professional organisations.

"ISNA has a mission of not only serving Muslims in North America, but also it helping Muslims to share their intellectual resources, and do the networking among Muslims worldwide.

"Alhamdulillah, ISNA was among the first to recognise the tremendous potential of Malaysia, and of the leadership of the Prime Minister Honourable Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"It was in this spirit that ISNA publications not only continuously reported his speeches and statements, but also focused on progress in Malaysia.

"Indeed, our coverage of Malaysia has created admiration for its leadership among Muslims in North America. This was reflected in our invitation to the Honourable Prime Minister to address the ISNA Trade and Business Forum. We are thankful to the Prime Minister for accepting our invitation."

Mentioned thereafter was the flood of angry messages said to have been received by ISNA after the court verdict.

Surely astonishing in the circumstances was its call for the court judgment to be "reviewed by competent and religious authorities".

The letter continues: "Your Excellency, allow me to say that unless the Prime Minister's office intervenes and announces an immediate change in the case, we regret that it will be very difficult to have him under the circumstances".

Question: Does ISNA with its intellectual resources and worldwide networking not know about the division of authority between the executive, legislative and judiciary?

Question: Does ISNA not know that no head of state or government can intervene in a judicial process?

Question: Would ISNA make such a request if and when an American or Canadian court passes judgment on a Muslim?

As things are an appeal has been lodged in the Anwar verdict for hearing by the court of appeal.

Question: After the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 which killed 168 people sections in the Western media blamed Muslim Arabs. In the end it was discovered that American rightwingers were the real culprit. Did ISNA register its protest?

In the year following the bombing more than 300 incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes were recorded in the US.

Question: Some Hollywood films depict Muslims as "terrorists" and Arab men in their robe forever chasing blondes. Has ISNA registered its displeasure?

In the context of things a look at past history is necessary as when Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic story about slavery in America was published in 1852. Uncle Tom the slave was described as one obedient, dutiful and pious. In spite of his goodness he was beaten to death by the drunken slave owner Simon Legree.

Being named Uncle Tom meant being a thrall to "adjustment and submission". There were other Uncle Toms in the later stages of American history.

To ISNA we say: don't expect our leader to be an Uncle Tom!

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