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Malay Rulers eminently qualified to foster unity of the ummah

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DURING the Aidil Adha celebrations in Kedah last week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that the Malay Rulers can play a greater role in fostering unity amongst Muslims through the respective State Religious Councils and Fatwa Councils.

He added however: "I do not know how this can be done but we do not want the Rulers to be involved in politics." The solution raises some interesting issues and implications.

Islam is global and borderless. All Muslims are brothers wherever they may be irrespective of race, colour, language or nationality.

The reality today, however, is that Muslims are divided even at the national level as can be seen in the tragic events taking place in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Turkey.

There is no problem with the religion itself as amply demonstrated by the recently concluded annual Haj pilgrimage when more than two million Muslims from all parts of the world congregated in Arafat, Mina and Mecca to perform their religious obligations in peace and serenity.

The root cause of infighting amongst Muslims is almost entirely political. Which brings us to the Malaysian reality and the concern of Dr Mahathir, nay of all Muslims in this country, on the division of Muslims perceptibly along political party affiliations, principally between the members of Umno and Pas.

The problem is compounded by the fact that both Umno and Pas are Malay-based political parties. As all Malays are Muslims the real issue is clouded. Is the political divide between Malays or Muslims?

Much of this division is really in the attitude of politicians - if you are not with us then you are against us - even when they belong to the same party. Such attitudes create the impression the Malays are politically immature or that they still live in a feudal society or have a narrow interpretation of the Islamic injunction of loyalty to the leaders. Historically, however, the Malays have demonstrated time and again that they are politically astute. In 1946, when the British imposed the Malayan Union Constitution which practically stripped the Malay Rulers of their sovereignty and political powers and reduced them to merely heads of the Islamic religion in their respective States, the Malays rebelled.

Their rallying point was the Malay Rulers with the battle cry "Hidup Melayu". That was half a century ago. With a multiparty system in a parliamentary democracy, the Malay Rulers can no longer play the role of uniting the Malays because such a role will decidedly be political. Islam is a way of life and therefore politics cannot be separated from religion. Indeed politicians, whether from Umno or Pas often quote the Quran or Hadith as authority, guidance or justification when making political statements.

Therein lies the mischief because sometimes the statements are regarded as fatwa. And there are many conflicting unauthorised fatwa being bandied about as a means of gaining political support.

The Malay Rulers in their capacity as head of Islam in their States do play an active role in the issuance of fatwa as the occasion arises, either by declaring a purported fatwa is wrong or what the fatwa is for a given situation. The State Islamic Religious Council is empowered to take action against fatwa offenders.

The Malay Rulers as Muslim Rulers are duty bound to foster unity of the

ummah and protect the religion. They are eminently qualified to perform this role which they have been doing by graciously officiating at Islamic functions and attending Friday prayers at different mosques throughout the State.

Recently, the Yang diPertuan Agong attended Friday prayers at the mosque of the International Islamic University in Gombak where the congregation was truly international. The sermon was delivered in Arabic, English and Malay. Attendance at non-Malay mosques will enhance their Muslim leadership role.

In furtherance of this role, gatherings of Muslims of different political and social interests should be organised by the Religious Affairs Department at which the Ruler is given the opportunity to meet with fellow Muslims. Such an occasion could be a simple feast after Friday prayers.

The Malay Rulers have consistently shown that they are capable of distinguishing between a political and a religious event. They encourage attendance by Muslims of different political parties at religious and social functions. Indeed the Sultan of Kedah conferred a Datukship on the president of Pas, Dr Fadzil Noor although his State is governed by Umno. Sultan Iskandar Shah of Malacca in the 14th century and the Malay Rulers after him have been the uniting force of Muslims in this country and God willing, they will continue to play a significant role in uniting the ummah for generations to come.

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