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`Muslims split into factions'

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KOTA KINABALU, Mon. - Malaysian Muslims have broken into factions and are now opposing each other due to the different interpretations of the Quran and the Islamic teachings, especially those advanced by political groups.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the confusion arising from a host of different interpretations of the religion had made unity among Malaysian Muslims difficult to achieve.

He said this was despite the fact that Muslims in Malaysia only made up 60 per cent of the 22 million population.

Dr Mahathir was addressing a congregation of men and women Quran reciters, scholars and religious department officials who converged at the Sa'adah Hall in Wisma Muis for the opening of the 43rd National-level Quran recital assembly.

Twenty-six men and women reciters are taking part in the four-day assembly.

Dr Mahathir said if the ulama who interpreted and translated the Quran had interests different from those of the religion, they would legitimise what was illegitimate to advance the priorities of their own groups, movements or schools of thought.

"If the ulama are politicians, their interpretations will be towards advancing their own politics," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Muslims had broken into factions and sects according to their teachers who advanced their own interpretations.

"Differences in certain areas which do not affect the core teachings of Islam are acceptable. But if the differences are glaring and affect the very pillar of the religion, those with authority over religious matters should take immediate remedial action.

"It will be irresponsible of those given the responsibility of ensuring Islam's good name to allow deviant teachings and practices which confuse and eventually destroy the people's faith," he said.

Dr Mahathir said if the differences did not affect the faith of Muslims, they should not be fighting one another and creating factions.

"It is impossible for any Muslim group to force other Muslims to accept their interpretation of the religion."

Dr Mahathir said when Islam was trying to gain ground, a group known as khawarij had tried to force other Muslims to accept their interpretation of the religion.

As a result, he said, large-scale wars broke out between Muslims.

"As long as differences prevail and factions exist, Muslim unity and brotherhood cannot possibly be achieved," he said, adding that this meant that Muslims had little regard for the religion's most important tenet - that all Muslims are brothers.

Dr Mahathir said only through thorough understanding of the Quran could Muslim unity be achieved.

"From Quran recital assemblies such as this, one can learn the true meaning of the religion without being influenced by the confusing interpretations of the various interest groups," he said.

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