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IIUM aims for world recognition

Saiful Azhar Abdullah; Annie Freeda Cruz
RECTOR Professor Dr M. Kamal Hassan speaks to Saiful Azhar Abdullah and Annie Freeda Cruz about the achievements, hopes and aspirations of the International Islamic University Malaysia.

Q: How did the idea to set up the IIUM come about?

Kamal: You may not realise it, but the way you put the question is very significant. Most of the time the question is whose idea it was to set up the International Islamic University. The idea of establishment.

I would make the distinction between the establishment of the university as a physical reality and ideas preceding the establishment in 1983.

I remember this because I was directly involved in this in 1982. I think it was nearly the end of 1982 when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) made known in his office (about the proposed setting up of IIUM). We were invited to his office.

At that time, the Minister of Education Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud and a few others were invited to the PM's office in late 1982 and he (Prime Minister) informed us that he would like to establish an international Islamic university by May 1983.

So the decision was made by the Prime Minister and the Government that he led and the university was established in May 1983 ... and our first batch of students was enrolled in July 1983.

So from the time of the announcement by the Prime Minister to the establishment in May 1983, many people were involved especially those from the Ministry of Education.

The idea has been there for quite some time in Malaysia. I would attribute that to the time of Allahyarham Zaaba (Tan Sri Dr Zainal Abidin Ahmad) who expressed the desire to see an Islamic university.

In Malaya, Zaaba in 1934 was a prominent Malay intellectual, educationist, linguist and devoted Muslim scholar.

I could trace it to that time. Many people had expressed the desire to have an Islamic university in Malaysia. I could mention some organisation - Persatuan Bekas Pelajar-Pelajar Kolej Islam, Persatuan Bekas Pelajar-Pelajar Timur Tengah, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia. In 1973-74, there was a big battle of the proponents of a universiti kebangsaan and a university of Islam.

The proponent for "Universiti Islam" was Professor Ungku Omar Ahmad who died very young, at the age of 38. He was the champion for the establishment of an Islamic university. Then we had the PKPIM (Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia) and had the conference on the establishment of the university in which Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was involved as president of PKPIM and Abim.

And many other organisations would also like to see the establishment of the Islamic university in early 1970s.

(But) what materialised then was the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1973 and this was regarded by the proponents of the Islamic university as a victory for the nationalist agenda and the setting up of the faculty for Islamic studies in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was regarded as fulfilment of that desire.

But naturally the proponents of Universiti Islam in Malaysia were not satisfied with just a faculty of Islamic studies in UKM.

So the desire was not fulfilled completely ... people still wanted to have a full-fledged Islamic university separated from UKM.

The demand went on and continued after the establishment of UKM. Then you know that in 1981 Dr Mahathir became PM and before that he was the Minister of Education.

In 1977, there was a first world conference on Muslim education held in Mecca and interestingly enough all these people were there - Dr Mahathir, Anwar, Professor Syed Naguib Alatas and many other scholars. It was attended by some 300 scholars from all over the world. I was also there.

And then Dr Mahathir became the Prime Minister in 1981, and in 1982, Anwar joined Umno.

What I knew was that there was demand for an Islamic university in Malaysia by hundreds of people and at the World Conference on Muslim Education in Mecca in 1977, Prof Ismail had also presented his concept for an Islamic university.

I must say just to put things on the table that you may have to ask the PM ... I do not know what made him decide to establish IIUM in 1983 and what were the decisions that led him to make it known to the public that he would like to establish International Islamic University and not just Islamic university.

What happened in 1981-1982, I do not know. But, at the end of 1982, I was informed that the International Islamic University was to be established by May 1983.