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Islam and modernity go hand in hand

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ISLAM was given its special position in the Constitution because at the time of independence, the Malays who are the native people, were in the majority.

No doubt that the provision in the Constitution plays a vital role in making Malaya, and later Malaysia, a peaceful and stable multi-ethnic and multi-religious country.

The strategy of balanced development was clearly spelt out by the country's second Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak when he said that:

"Economic growth is a necessary goal for Malaysia, but it must not be considered to outweigh others nor should it be assumed that every action that increases wealth is necessarily right.

"Our development should have a focus not entirely on material gain, but a focus also on the human, social, cultural and religious aspects of our lives, so that we can build up a Malaysia which is not only economically stable, but which is also a nation of people who are happy within themselves, self reliant and secure within their own sincerity of purpose."

Let's not forget that the newly independent Malaya had to contend with numerous challenges. On the political front, there were the threats of the communists and the Indonesian confrontation.

On the country's economy, a decision had to be made whether it should remain agricultural-based or diversify. The social challenges included inter-ethnic relations, income disparity and educational opportunities.

Early efforts of the Government were aimed at restoring peace and stability by beefing up the police and military forces, introducing the identification card for every citizen and organising resettlement programmes, creating an environment conducive for ethnic bargaining and incorporating planned changes through five-year plans.

This is proof that the Government has taken into full consideration the issue of the *maslahah* or public interest, an Islamic principle applied by the Prophet Muhammad when administering the city of Medina in the seventh century.

Other specific programmes included the opening of vast areas of land for settlers under the *Felda* and *Felcra* schemes, the introduction of development agencies in the form of *Rida* (then *Mara*), the setting up of universities, colleges, boarding schools, research institutes, museums, archives and mosques, the provision of utilities such as electricity, water supply and telephones, the building of infrastructure like roads, hospitals, parks and radio and television broadcasting stations.

No doubt these are some of the reasons why the Prime Minister, *Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad* has accorded the late *Tunku Abdul Rahman* the title, "the greatest Malaysian leader of all".

After the 1969 May 13 riots, a new social contract was adopted. It also coincided with the country's initial move into industrialisation. The New Economic Policy focused on eradicating poverty and restructuring society.

The greatest achievement of the NEP was the tremendous increase in the number of Malay-Muslims who managed to pursue tertiary education.

The Second Outline Perspective Plan took over where the NEP had left off. Considerable success, too, was achieved at the end of the OPP2. The incidence of poverty among Malaysians was greatly reduced.

The proportion of Muslims in the professional and technical as well as administrative and managerial categories increased tremendously during the period.

Improvements, too, were registered in the quality of life arising from the enhancement in per capita income.

Today, Malaysia is embarking on the OPP3. This 10-year plan is expected to lay the foundation for the country's leap to becoming a developed nation.

The focus is on strengthening the critical elements that support the development of the knowledge-based economy.

One of the most important elements is the creation of a critical mass of knowledge workers, a notion very much in line with the Islamic teaching that puts a high value on a knowledgeable person.

Since independence, education has always been given top priority in the nation's annual budget. Many universities have been opened to ensure that enough manpower will be trained to keep the nation moving.

To ensure that institutions of higher learning produce well-balanced graduates, there has also been an unrelenting emphasis on religious education.

In 1983, Malaysia adopted an Islamic system of finance as an alternative to the already established conventional system. The main aim of Islamic finance is achieving more stability and efficiency in allocating resources.

The takaful insurance schemes were also introduced. The other Islamic financial instrument is pawn broking or ar-rahnu. Bank Rakyat is a co-operative credit institution that currently deals with this product.

The administration of zakat collection centres has now been modernised and computerised. Zakat is now collected from individuals and companies, and disbursed to the needy more efficiently and effectively.

Although the Islamic financial facilities are intended for Muslims, they are gaining popularity among the non-Muslims. Many of the customers of Bank Islam Malaysia are non-Muslims.

Before independence, the position of the syariah courts and offices was truly subordinate, with limited jurisdiction and being positioned at the bottom of the court structure.

Cases decided by syariah courts could be overridden by the decision of the civil courts. However, by 1984 the power of the syariah courts was elevated.

This was further enhanced in 1988, when an amendment to Article 121 of the Federal Constitution that was passed by Parliament put an end to the conflict of jurisdiction between the civil and syariah courts.

The setting up of the Malaysian Syariah Judiciary Department in 1998 has expedited efforts to bring uniformity in the administration of Islamic law and management of Islamic legal institutions.

The syariah courts have become an integral part of the court system in Malaysia. They have now become more organised, better equipped and highly respected.

Since attaining independence, Malaysia has been an important part of the Islamic world.

Malaysia is one of the founding members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). The late Tunku Abdul Rahman was the OIC secretary-general from 1971-1973.

The country has organised the International Conference of Foreign Ministers twice. At the ICFM 2000, it was elected to head a committee to look into the restructuring of the OIC.

In 2003, Malaysia shall, for the first time, host the OIC Summit of kings and heads of state and Governments.

Since independence, the Government of Malaysia that is led by the Muslims has shown to all quarters that governance based on Islamic principles can be truly practised because it neither condemns nor excludes.

The leadership bears the responsibility to protect life, wealth, dignity and honour of every Malaysian. The people reciprocate by working hard and giving their utmost support to development programmes.

Malaysia's success in building a modern, peaceful, stable and prosperous society, guided by the social and moral values of Islam has made many in other parts of the world look upon it in admiration.

As the country moves from an agricultural-based economy to industrialisation and to the k-economy, it has successfully shown that Islam and modernity can survive side by side.