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Muslims must devise system of governance, says PM

Ashraf Abdullah in Dubai

DUBAI, Thurs. - Muslim nations can only take on challenges of the 21st century if they can put their own house in order and learn from their failures, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said that for a variety of reasons, Muslims had been reduced from front-runners during the days of the great Muslim civilisation many centuries ago to laggards today.

He cited constant feuds among Muslims, misinterpretation of the Quran and the hadith, the work of "political ulama" who preached hatred of Muslims who did not accept their teachings and politics, as well as the so-called scholars who denounced worldly skills, as reasons for the failure.

Addressing an audience comprising some 450 leading businessmen from throughout the United Arab Emirates, Dr Mahathir said Muslims were no less capable of acquiring knowledge, of innovations and new ideas.

He said having failed to participate in the Industrial Revolution, Muslims must now be prepared to take on challenges of the Information Age.

"We must administer our countries well, promoting stability and economic growth."

The wealth generated should be used to build much needed infrastructure and to equip themselves with skills of the Information Age and of the Industrial Age.

"We must always be at the cutting edge of technology," Dr Mahathir said in his keynote address entitled "Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century: Role of the Muslim Nations" at the Emirates would be good for certain countries, especially in the Middle East, Dr Mahathir replied: "The problem with dictatorship is that if you put the wrong dictator, it will be difficult to remove him. You will probably have to shoot him."

Dr Mahathir said giving the right to every citizen to cast votes also did not guarantee that the right Government was elected.

"Because it is always possible to buy votes, and it is always possible to get some public relations people to dress you up and make you look handsome, you get elected. It has nothing to do with the policies you pursue," he said.

He said in the United States, the greatest proponent of liberal democracy, the recent presidential election was even taken to court, something that normally took place in Third World countries.

He said every country should be given the opportunity to choose its own system.

Earlier in his speech, Dr Mahathir said it was difficult to understand how democracy worked, especially liberal democracy.

"It is not the system that matters. It is good governance by good people that we need. And feudal kings, even dictators, have provided and can provide good governance."

"The only thing good about democracy is that theoretically at least, we can change Governments without violence," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that a good Government was not beyond Muslims as what they needed was a professional civil service, police and defence forces.

"They can all be trained and installed with the right spirit and the proper sense of duty to the nation."

Under a good honest leader, he said, be he a King, Prime Minister or President, helped by advisers and experts, a country could develop.

"If the Muslim countries are going to play a role in this century, they must first establish good Governments dedicated to developing the countries to achieve developed country status. We are not going to be able to do this overnight. It will take time, a lot of time, but it is possible," he said.

At the question-and-answer session, Dr Mahathir spoke on a myriad of issues including the need for Muslims countries to achieve their own globalisation process similar to the days of the Great Muslim Civilisation.