

21/07/2002

The quicksand of narrow thinking

THE essence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at the International Forum on Islam in Kuala Lumpur is clear: The wilful neglect of non-religious knowledge is the cause of the ummah's malaise. The loss of the thinking self has robbed the ummah of its dignity, consigning it to a state of disarray.

Ironically, Muslims who are anointed as God's vice-gerents on earth have become the dispossessed, unable to defend or even take care of themselves. Worse, the past hundred years of Islamic revivalism in the Sunni world have yielded Afghanistan's Taliban and, in Malaysia, Pas with its intransigent, rigid and bellicose attitude that diminishes the virtues of Islam.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, Muslims who wish to revive the great spirit of Islam and its civilising ethos must discard their old mindsets, seek knowledge and be tolerant of contending arguments. Knowledge can transform the very condition of our existence. It can transform our conception of ourselves and form the premise for the new reconstruction of the self or tazkiyyah annafs. Mastery of knowledge alters the balance of power between communities and leads to freedom from abject slavery and oppression or islah. Our genesis, Islam's phenomenal and explosive growth and our past glory was the sole expression of the divine injunction to seek knowledge. Indeed, physics, mathematics, geology, chemistry, astronomy, anthropology, sociology and historiography developed as the handmaidens of Islamic philosophy.

The reason of the ummah's decline is the transformation of a people, Muslims, from processors of knowledge to recyclers of concepts from our medieval ulama. We, thanks to the obsessions with forms rather than substance, have become estranged from the true teachings of Islam and have also been deprived of our capacity to generate ideas more meaningful to our times. This has stripped Islam of its vitality, leaving behind an embittered, insecure and clueless ummah.

Sadly, we delude ourselves into thinking there is a Muslim renaissance. What we have, in reality, are the passion plays of religio-political movements. They seek to establish the pristine Islamic state and purify the faith of 7th century Arabia. It is the fury of a misguided faith. The medieval ghosts have made a comeback, teaching that the past is a perfumed glory on a magic carpet that is woven from dress code and hudud ala Pas. The corruption of the soul has a new avatar - religio-political fanaticism. Thus, the fear psychosis drummed into the minds by the politicians disguised as ulama and the revolutionary fervour aroused by the likes of Osama ben Laden. But ultimately, it is the cynical tongue of vote-bank politics that guide these political clerics.

As seen in the recent Pendang and Anak Bukit by-elections, Umno was accused of rejecting Islamic law. But Islamic law is only a subset of Islam. Contrary to what Pas says, there is more to Islam than just legal injunctions. Being a Muslim means a lot more than just a legal entity. And this is where religio-political parties with a superficial understanding of Islamic law or a rigid attitude towards Islamic traditions err, often with dangerous consequences.

We have said it often. The ground rules of Malaysian political life have to be redrawn and religious medievalism needs to be exorcised from its public discourse. We must remember that misguided revolutions devour their

own children.

The sooner we discard the old mindset, realize intellectual self-determination, encourage freedom of thought and unite, the sooner will we redeem our past glory. More importantly, as Dr Mahathir said, "We need to act and how we should act to implement the obvious is what should occupy our minds and our time now." Otherwise Henry VIII's last words will haunt us, "All is lost. Monks, monks, monks."