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Tell people of party's accomplishments, Umno chiefs told

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Umno leaders have to tell the people that the party's accomplishments in developing the country and raising the nation's standard of living are in essence religious accomplishments.

Party vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib said that the message that Umno was a party that practised "total Islam" had to be disseminated through every level of society from the teachers to the Village Development and Security Committees (JKKK) and to the people.

"Maybe this has not been emphasised before, but we have to do it now.

"We cannot be drawn into the contest of promoting a superficial brand of Islam of just rituals and turbans, like what Pas is stressing.

"The concept of total Islam involved the total development of the ummah (community) through socio-economic progress, fighting poverty and educating the people, while providing spiritual guidance," he said today.

Muhammad was responding to the suggestion made by a Mahathir International Dialogue participant that Malay leaders had to get religious accreditation and to take the religious approach in villages, in order to be closer and earn the respect of the Malay grassroots.

Islamic Syura Council of Southern California chairman Dr Yahya Khairy Abdul Rahman said yesterday that Malay leaders had to adopt the religious approach by attending funerals and certifying marriages and births.

Muhammad said he disagreed with the suggestion as Umno leaders had to be more than religious figures these days by developing the country's infrastructure.

"In the past our leaders were imams in the kampungs, but now we have to do more than just sembahyang jenazah (prayers for the deceased).

"We have to develop an Islamic nation.

"We have to provide a precedent of what a modern Islamic nation is."

Umno Youth information chief Azimi Daim said the movement had always been involved in religious programmes aimed at shoring up Umno's image as a party that struggled for Islam, in order to connect to the grassroots.

These programmes included courses designed to teach youths to become imam and bilal and on performing communal religious rituals such as mandi mayat (cleansing the dead) and sembahyang jenazah so that they could be close to the kampung folk.

"At the same time we are promoting a brand of Islam that focuses on the fundamentals such as honesty, cleanliness and integrity instead of an Islam based on fanaticism.

"What's the use of talking about hudud and the Islamic state, when those who promote it are aggressive? You should prove that you're religious by excelling academically, by serving and developing the country," Azimi said.

He said while the movement had of late, neglected this approach, it was not too late to try and reach the younger generation, to expose them to Umno.

"We cannot expect overnight results and hope that they will all vote for the party in the next general election.

"But we have to try and remedy the party's image and gain the confidence of the grassroots."