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Malaysia a beacon of stability in the Islamic world

Hardev Kaur

"GO TO Malaysia if you want to see moderate Islam at work", a French scholar was told in Egypt and Morocco. He was there to do research on Islam. The scholar was sufficiently convinced by those he met including Islamic scholars in these countries, to change his travel plans and come to Malaysia.

He was not disappointed and was pleasantly surprised, like many others, to see progress and development in Islamic Malaysia. "I did not expect it to be such a modern country," he admitted when met in Kuala Lumpur recently.

Malaysia's development and progress surprise many. More so as they know very little about the country and their views are coloured by the fact that this is an Islamic country and a developing one at that.

Once they step foot on Malaysian soil, even beginning from the ultra-modern airport, they are amazed and surprised with the level of development, peace and harmony in an Islamic state, a multi-racial and multi-religious society.

For some the Malaysian environment and situation - multi-religious, multi-racial and an Islamic state - is a potent combination.

The country does not "adhere" to the standards and norms that have come to be associated with an Islamic country - poor, underdeveloped, backward, unstable and its people, Muslims and non-Muslims, living in suspicion of each other. But not so in Malaysia.

It is a model of peace and stability and one of racial and religious tolerance. Malaysia has shown the world that people of different races and religions can live together in peace and harmony and indeed pursue development for the benefit of all.

Muslims "are said to be irrational, recalcitrant, and unable to govern and develop their countries" and that they are given to "violence and terrorism".

Malaysia's peace and progress have proven these theories and commonly held beliefs wrong, among them that Islam and Muslims are not able to "get along with people of other religions or races or even with Muslim people of different sects".

Of late, the religion and its followers are so seriously and badly misunderstood that terrorism and violence are equated with Islam and Muslims. Even though events around the world have shown that terrorism is not an Islamic monopoly, the views are still prevalent and more so since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington DC.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has spoken on various occasions and explained that "Islam does not promote terrorism. Islam is a religion of peace. But when Muslims feel they are being oppressed, they are not getting a fair deal" they are likely to react.

Perhaps Malaysia's greatest achievement is the management of race relations and development. The Prime Minister attributed the racial harmony in the country to "Islam and because the majority of the people here are Muslims".

Many Muslim states recognise and appreciate the progress and development of Malaysia. Indeed Malaysia and Egypt are the only two Muslim countries that have progressed into the developed world, according to Anatole Lieven, a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International

Peace in London.

Can Muslims in Malaysia contribute to peace and harmony among people who are so racially and religiously incompatible? The answer is "Yes" according to the Prime Minister "if they follow the fundamentals of Islam, the true teachings of Islam".

"Fundamentalism is not about being extreme. The fundamental teachings of Islam emphasise the brotherhood of all Muslims ... The ignorant desert Arabs, upon embracing Islam, were able to provide good governments and to develop their lands, frequently working together or using the services of non-Muslims".

Malaysia's progress and development have been due to hard work of all the races and communities. While it is an Islamic country and the majority of its population are Muslims, this has not hindered development.

In fact "development is compatible with Islam", Dr Mahathir told the Williamsburg Conference, adding that the "majority Malay/Muslims in Malaysia prefer to adhere to the true and fundamental teachings of Islam rather than the interpretations made by Muslims with political agendas both in the past and at present.

"That is why we can claim that Islam is the reason for peace and harmony in Malaysia. Islam is also the reason for Malaysia's rapid development," Dr Mahathir told the Williamsburg Conference recently.

And in pursuing its goals of attaining developed nation status by 2020, Malaysia has drawn up development plans that cover five, 15 and 30-year periods and these plans are compatible with Islam.

Malaysia, a moderate modern state, has strong views on regional and international issues and its leadership is not afraid to articulate them, even if these views are not the same as those held by the developed and powerful nations.

During the World Economic Forum (WEF) in New York earlier this year, a participant from Egypt congratulated the Prime Minister for his "forthright, lucid and enlightened" speech and for articulating what needs to be said which other Muslim and Arab leaders would not dare articulate them.

Its views are beginning to be heard and taken notice of. Even the US now acknowledges the positive role played by Malaysia. The US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, James Kelly said, "moderate and pre-dominantly Muslim Malaysia is a beacon of stability in the region".

According to Kelly, Washington had been gratified by the strong contributions made by Dr Mahathir, his Government and the Malaysian people to the international effort to eradicate terrorism.

There is now a realisation that Malaysia with its moderate brand of Islam could act as a leader of the Muslim world. Even now many regard Dr Mahathir as the "leader of the Islamic world".

During the recent WEF, a foreign journalist had asked around as to who could be the leader of the Islamic world and the answer from one Al Jazeera correspondent was "Dr Mahathir Mohamad".

Thus, it is not surprising that the leader of the world's most powerful and developed nation would want to meet Dr Mahathir. With the US engaged in an all-out war to fight terrorism and the current hostilities against the Muslims and the West Asia crisis, the views of the leader of the Islamic world, Dr Mahathir, would definitely be useful, educational and instructive for US President George W. Bush.

e-mail:hardev@alumni.KSG.harvard.edu

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