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Mahathir-Women

MUSLIMS MUST NOT IGNORE THE WOMEN

By: Wan A. Hulaimi

LONDON, Sept 25 (Bernama) -- While some people view the subject of women as "trivial", Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world may only be left with 650 million if they ignore the women, which make up half of the ummah (global Muslims).

The Prime Minister said this when fielding questions at the packed hall of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) here in a moment when the light-hearted collided with serious issues during his hour-long speech on Monday.

What prompted Dr Mahathir to give out the number of Muslims by gender division was a provocative question from the president of the British-Malaysia Association Datuk Neville Green who expressed what he saw as "a problem" in present day Malaysia of more and more young women wearing the "tudung" (headdress).

Green, who regarded Malaysia as "the fastest forward-moving Muslim country", said that he had just one reservation, and that was about the increasing number of younger Muslims wearing "more conservative" Muslim dress.

The questioner, who drew a gasp from some members of the audience, said: "But I have a problem. Each and every time I go (to Malaysia) I see the problem I am going to identify. On the one hand we see increasingly the women in Malaysia coming into top positions...on the other hand - and this is my problem - I find more and more of the younger ladies wearing more and more conservative Muslim dress, and I just wonder what they are passing a message to their non-Muslim friends, or if they are becoming more Islamic, demonstrably more conservative. It seems to be a contradictory situation."

Dr Mahathir, who spoke at length in his speech about the necessity for Muslims to look not just at the form, but also at the content, said that there was no problems in Malaysia with women who prefer to dress conservatively, and the choice was up to them.

He tempered this answer with the need for Muslims - both men and women - to compete in the world because "we could not afford to discard our women and reduce the strength of our 1.3 billion total."

He said: "okay, if you want to cover your head, by all means cover your head. But if we tell you to pilot a fighter plane, you can wear that headdress but make sure that you can hear through the earphone."

"In Malaysia we have women who are fighter pilots, they can do everything, they can climb mountains, they are free to do everything but they must keep with the norms that are required by Muslims."

"But in Malaysia, even if they cover their heads they get on very well with the Chinese, Indians, and work together, play together. It is possible to dress conservatively but the mind must not be conservative."

Dr Mahathir was also asked to expand his views on democracy, which he said was compatible with Islam because Prophet Muhammad did not create dynasties.

He said that the Prophet left it to the Muslims to elect his successor from the best among them.

One questioner asked about his views on dynastic rule in the Muslim Middle East, and of President Muammar Gaddafi's recent offer of a substantial sum of money to victims of the Lockerbie air disaster.

Dr Mahathir gave a diplomatic reply, saying it was not for him to tell people what to do with their money.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said that democracy was evolving, but what concerned him was the growing dominance of minority rights over the majority, to the disadvantage of the many.

A lady from the Czech Republic made the assertion that Islam, growing from a religion that existed 2,000 years ago, was out of date.

Dr Mahathir disagreed with this, saying that while situations might have been different, the principles were still true. Muslims must adapt.

He said that Muslims could not ignore the validity of DNA testing and its reliability say, in a rape case, even if four witnesses were not present as required by Shariah law.

The speech, on the theme of Islam and the Ummah, examined the question if Muslims needed to re-examine and re-invent themselves in the face of new challenges.

His answer in the speech was that there was no need for Islam to be re-invented because it was an eternal truth, but Muslims must look again at the way they look at Islam and not to be obsessed with the form but the content to meet the demands of a modern world.

"We have money and that is our strength," he told a questioner.

A capacity crowd attended Dr Mahathir's speech in his last visit to Britain as prime minister before he retires next month.

Many late comers were turned away, including an ambassador from the Gulf States.

Before his departure for an official visit to Sweden, Dr Mahathir stayed back to meet some members of the audience who formed a long queue to shake his hand and express their appreciation.

-- BERNAMA

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