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New vision building bridges between Islam and the West at grassroots level

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ONCE again violence on the global stage overtook the feelings of peace and togetherness in the local community.

No sooner had Harmony Day passed and multicultural Australia reaffirmed its celebration of difference, global events exploded to undermine the quiet efforts at the municipality level.

The city of Darebin in northern suburban Melbourne was among one of many municipalities all over the country to hold events to mark Harmony Day on March 21.

Whatever little that was picked up in the media was instantly overtaken by headlines of the Israeli assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, founding leader of the Islamic resistance movement Hamas.

The reaction to the killing that followed polarised public opinion, submerging what might be achieved in finding common ground on Harmony Day.

Against this backdrop, visiting American theologian Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and Mohammed Alami Musa, president of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, shared their experiences in public talks and private discussion.

And Australians took comfort in the landslide return of the Barisan Nasional Government, seeing it as Malaysian endorsement of progressive Islam and repudiation of Islamist militancy.

Attitudes towards Islam, as with much of life, are not set in black and white. They are multi-faceted, multi-dimensional.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer welcomed the "smooth and successful conduct" of the Malaysian election.

"The results are a resounding endorsement of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's leadership and of his reform agenda, which includes tackling corruption, transparent government, and continuing strong economic development," he said.

At a broader level, the election is seen in the light of the scrutiny that Islam has come under, when Australia's role in the "war against terrorism" as an ally of the United States is contested.

There are attempts to understand the deeper impetus to terrorism, as in studies by Sri Lankan-born Anglican Christian priest Dr Ruwan Palapathwala.

Palapathwala is a parish priest in Melbourne as well as a lecturer at a theological college. Palapathwala, in an interview in his church's diocesan newspaper, says that in trying to understand what motivates so-called religious people to commit acts of terror, we must understand what they're reacting to.

"They're reacting to political or ideological forces such as imperialism and globalisation," he says.

Palapathwala's view is echoed by Feisal, president of the American Sufi Muslim Association Society and imam of Masjid Al-Farah in New York City. Feisal was on a visit to Sydney and Melbourne, where he took part in a public lecture, and shared a conversation with a public intellectual who is leader of a Christian organisation.

Linkages between politics, economics and religion figured in analyses of the Malaysian election, and broader understanding of national development. Democracy in Malaysia has long perplexed observers in Australia, if not met with trenchant criticism.

As The Age put it in an editorial, "on the face of it, an election that

overwhelmingly returns a government for the 11th time in a row is not an advertisement for democracy, particularly when one man led the nation for 22 years".

But in acknowledging a broad spectrum of democracy, The Age credits former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad with a legacy that includes a stable, multiracial and prosperous society.

The paper notes that under Dr Mahathir's watch, households living in poverty were reduced from one in three to one in 20.

"Extremism thrives only in extreme political and economic circumstances," it says.

"What this election shows is that, given a reasonable degree of justice and well-being, most Muslims, like any other people, will choose the path of modernisation."

There was much of this in evidence at the Harmony Day event at the city of Darebin. Harmony Day has been held nationally each year since 1999 on the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

At Preston, in the city of Darebin, people of different faiths came together to share in a lunch and a smorgasbord of cultural entertainment put on by the municipal council.

They watched a documentary on a community relations project centred on the neighbourhood mosque, and saw the launch of a film project on what faith means to young people.

In "Faith: The Art of Believing", six young film-makers will go out into the community and interview young people on what faith means to them, the practice of their faith, and how they interact with people of other faiths.

Youth from six faith communities will be represented: Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, indigenous spirituality and alternative spirituality.

There was no evidence in Darebin of the siege mentality that Muslims might face, as the title of Feisal's public lecture suggests.

"Islam Under Siege: Towards a New Vision for Muslims and the West" was the topic of Feisal's public discussion with ABC Radio National producer Margaret Coffey.

Feisal is founder of the Cordoba Initiative, a multi-faith effort to stimulate new approaches to achieving peace, and help build the relationship between Islam and the United States.

Taking questions from the floor, Feisal acknowledges a distinction in attitudes at the global and local levels. He urges continued efforts on the ground for the ripple effect they generate towards achieving critical mass, however scant the media and public recognition.

Whatever measure of Darebin's success, it's not easy, as the experience of a school principal in the audience at the Feisal lecture shows.

As much as 80-85 per cent of pupils at Newport Lakes Primary School, in suburban Newport, are Muslim. For Harmony Day, the school held an open day. "We couldn't get 'Aussie people' to come," said principal Bill Gilpin.

His question to Feisal: how do we work towards this new vision of Muslims at the grassroots level?

Beyond activities at the local level, as in Darebin, Feisal spoke of political leadership. He contrasted the approaches of US President George W. Bush and his predecessor of the 60s, John F. Kennedy.

In Feisal's estimation, Bush missed an opportunity to address the "Muslim street" when he dropped in on US forces in Baghdad to celebrate Thanksgiving. Against that, Kennedy's proclamation of Ich bin ein Berliner (I am a Berliner) during a visit to Berlin was monumental in the thaw of

US relations with Eastern Europe.

Feisal does not make the connection with his visit to Australia, but the Kennedy approach would be closer to the conversation he was to have the following day with Professor Joe Camilleri, professor of international relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, and president of Pax Christi Australia.

"Building Bridges between Islam and the West" engaged the public at a city bookstore.