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Changing the fate of Muslims

THE glory of Islam will not be revived with the establishment of the hudud and Pas' version of the Islamic state. The greatness of Islamic civilisation will not be restored with a religio-political discourse that is parochial, fearful, divisive, militant, tradition-bound and rooted in the soil of patriarchy. Nor will fanaticism disappear with military reprisal or greater homeland security. This is the crux of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at Egypt's Al-Azhar University.

But what will? Selfcriticism - an exercise long taken by Dr Mahathir despite the contemptuous questioning of his religious credentials by those who claimed to be the alim or religious scholars. The ummah's weaknesses lies in its failure to understand and adhere to Islam's true teachings and to strive to better its lot in this world as much as it prepares for life in the hereafter.

Despite earlier attempts by modernists such as Muhammad Abduh and Syed Qutb, Islam has yet to undergo a progressive reformation and enlightenment because its modernising voices - and there are many - have not consolidated into a coherent intellectual force. But if the Azharite sheikhs' acknowledgement of Dr Mahathir's thinking is any indication, this might signify a readiness among the Muslim countries, particularly the conservative establishments, to bring these voices to the fore.

But first, there is a need to contest the right and legitimacy of some ulama to be the sole interpreters of the values, norms and aesthetic standards of Islam. There is nothing sacred about a limited and highly protected discourse, developed over centuries by a group of men to support their narrow politics and produce a regime of control in which its major functions are to keep the ummah in the dark ages and women in bondage. The call to embrace the Islamic way of life, be it ala Taliban, Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran or Pas, but which at the same time denies Muslims from articulating their views makes for intellectual schizophrenia. How is it possible to live a holistic Islamic life without engaging in dialogue or having the space for discourse?

Diverse theological sects, jurisprudential views, political opinions and practices have divided the Muslims since a few decades after Prophet Muhammad's demise. This diversity should be a positive feature of Islam but alas, many are obsessed with the homogenisation of the Muslim. In Malaysia, Pas' politics has resulted in the production of the onedimensional Malay-Muslim and a collective mindset that focuses on the form rather than substance of the Quran.

Misinterpretations occur because many Muslims rely on tafsir bilma'thur (interpretation by traditions) and medieval juridical formulations but neglect tafsir bil-ray' (interpretation by way of philosophical deduction and personal exertion or ijti had). Yet the area of muamalat (laws on social transactions) requires adaptation by Muslims in light of the dynamics of their time. There must be an ijti had, a rethinking that seeks to grasp the value system of the Quran and verified Hadith as a whole and thus, to unite and glean new signposts in a world so unlike 7th century Arabia.

The Muslims have so long denied themselves the internal transformation so vital for the ummah's survival that today, they are backward, lacking in knowledge, unable to defend themselves or their religion and forced to resort to terror in order to seek revenge. The question is: Will they

strive to change their fate or succumb to the seduction of the false messiahs in the forms of political and militant Islam?