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Islamic democrats

LAST year, the Islamic Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials, AKP) swept into power. But the Islam that the leader of the Turkish ruling party, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, advocates is very similar to the one espoused by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the leader of the Malaysian ruling party. In an interview with this paper during his visit to Malaysia, Erdogan explained that, "when we established our party in Turkey, we were very open and clear about one fact. Ninety-nine per cent of the Turkish population are of the Islamic faith, but we are not establishing a party based on religion. We said we were establishing a party which would create safety for all religions, enhance basic rights and freedoms for all people and protect freedom of thought."

The AKP are "Islamic democrats" whose aspirations have more in common with Umno than with Pas, as Erdogan revealed in the interview. In contrast to the extremist brand of political Islam which brooks no division between politics and religion, Erdogan asserts that "Islam is not a religion that can be exploited for political purposes". He also does not believe that Islam and democracy are incompatible. "Turkey can serve as a model to show how the culture of Islam and democracy can coexist in a harmonious way, and we will like to show it in practice and how it can be achieved," he said.

Such views augur well for relations between Turkey and Malaysia, and for the Islamic world. In Erdogan, Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have an ally in their fight against the narrow and literal interpretations of Islam which look back at the ancient glories of the Caliphate rather than take the ummah forward into the global age.