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Turkish PM: Don't exploit Islam (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Islam cannot be exploited for political purposes because the religion might be marred by the shortcomings of political parties, said Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

He said if a political party declared itself to be Islamic, every mistake that it made would then be blamed on Islam.

Erdogan, who heads the Justice and Development Party, which has Islamic roots, said it was already a trend for Islam and every Muslim to be blamed whenever any Muslim was involved in terrorist acts.

"Yet terrorists exist in all faiths. People of all religions have somehow, one way or another, been involved in terrorism," he said in an interview with the New Straits Times Press group led by group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad at the Renaissance Hotel today.

Erdogan was on the last day of his three-day official visit here, during which he had talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Erdogan's party won the Turkish elections last November.

He said his party was not based on religion although 99 per cent of Turks are Muslims.

Asked if his party had links with Pas, Erdogan, who spoke through an interpreter, touched on its links with Umno instead.

He said his party was entering into a new relationship with Umno as a sister party, and that his party leaders had come to Malaysia two months ago to meet Umno leaders.

Erdogan said he sees Malaysia and Turkey as among the few countries in the world that could demonstrate a practical and harmonious coexistence of Islamic culture and democracy.

He also said Malaysia deserved respect and commendation for having achieved harmony in a society of many faiths and cultures.

Touching on the disunity among Muslims worldwide, Erdogan said the problem lay with the proliferation of different interpretations of Islamic teachings due to a lack of a single religious authority.

He also noted that while Islam had given priority to knowledge and learning, the literacy level among the 1.5 billion Muslims was very low.

"I think this is one of the saddest points of our people.

"We are no longer a society that thinks. Those who do not think have no chance to achieve."

Erdogan, who expressed hope for warmer bilateral relations, said Dr Mahathir had contributed a lot to Malaysian politics and development, noting that there had been many changes in Malaysia since his last visit three years ago.

He also said Abdullah had told him that he would continue with Dr Mahathir's policies after he takes over as Prime Minister in October.

Erdogan said his party and country, being realistic, wanted to be friends with its neighbours and other countries, including the United States.

"We are not out to create new enemies but to make new friends for our country."

He later left for Pakistan.