

'Progressives must use religion to counter ulama'

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By Nigel Aw

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said progressives who are opposed to conservative values by ulamas (religious scholars) must counter them with religious arguments and not with western arguments.

The problem, he said, is that in Malaysia is the non-conservatives who are educated in other fields tend to argue with conservative Muslim scholars in terms of their areas of learning, rather than based on religion.

Dr Mahathir High Level Expert Consultation on Islam and Women's Health"But it is important for those Muslims not specialised in religion to know their religion so that they can counter conservatives based on religion, and not some other value system," he said in his opening speech at the 'High Level Expert Consultation on Islam and Women's Health' conference in Kuala Lumpur this morning.

This, he said, was necessary to convince the general public, especially Muslims in the villages who would not accept arguments based on Western values.

"For example, in our country, we have a Muslim party (PAS) who says if you vote for them, you go to heaven.

"You laugh, but it is said by in the name of Islam from an Islamic party - to the less educated Muslims in the village, they are the ones with the turbans, not me.

"So they can't accept somebody's (argument) who is not wearing the turban. But when you point out to them what the Quran says, you will be accepted," he said.

Without religious learning, he said, non-conservatives or professionals would not have the credentials to counter the ulama.

"It is important for all of us to know our religion if we want to handle people bringing conservative ideas into a society (to the point) that it cannot progress, (such people being) the so called ulamas," he said.

'Focus less on punishments'

Mahathir also warned against subscribing an extreme interpretation of Islam and being obsessed with punishment.

He said over-emphasis by some Muslims on the sunnah and hadith - that he said was "optional" - over the Quran has caused the Muslim community to fall behind.

Dr Mahathir High Level Expert Consultation on Islam and Women's Health"For example, in Malaysia today there is a debate on hudud law. There is a tendency to focus on the

most severe punishment possible to appear more Islamic. That is why we see today things happening that are not compatible with the Quran," he said.

Instead, Mahathir said, we should espouse the principles of justice as upheld in the Quran rather than be obsessed with punishments.

"For example, how can there be justice if a Muslim steals and has to have his hand chopped off, but a non-Muslims steals he only gets two months prison?" he said in reference to opposition party PAS' plan to implement hudud law, that applies to Muslims only.

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