

## **'Rulers, scholars can be challenged under Islam'**

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In Islam, it is not wrong to question the authorities as neither governments nor rulers are sacred, according to Turkish writer and journalist Mustafa Akyol.

"Law is sacred. A ruler should abide by the law and if he doesn't, you have the right to question him," he said in a talk entitled 'Is liberty an Islamic value?', hosted by the Penang Institute in George Town yesterday.

Penang Institute CEO Zairil Khir Johari welcomed the audience of 80 to the event, while Penang executive councillor and Seberang Jaya assemblyperson Dr Afif Bahardin delivered the opening speech.

In his two-hour talk, Mustafa (left) cited the example of Khalifa Umar who, when giving a sermon in a mosque, was questioned by a woman.

"She quoted some verses from the Quran and he listened to her," said the well-known Turkish writer who is based in Istanbul. But during medieval times, patriarchy ruled and unreachable rulers invaded Islam. Obeying the ruler then became the norm," he said.

He cited another example where the Prophet was questioned by a war companion over a decision for the army to camp at a certain location. This was when the Prophet led the army in his first war against the pagans of Mecca.

The companion had asked if the decision was the Prophet's opinion or a revelation from God.

When the Prophet replied that it was merely his opinion, the companion said he had a different one. The Prophet listened to him and decided to camp at a different place, which turned out better for the army in terms of strategy.

"This is in our books, that if it is not a revelation, they can disagree with his opinion, respectfully of course," Mustafa said.

"In this era when there is no prophet, who is so sacred that we should blindly obey them? No ruler and or scholar in Islam is unchallengeable. Nobody has the right to claim undisputable knowledge and opinion. We are all servants of Allah. Nobody is superior than the other."

Mustafa, 41, is a columnist for the International New York Times and other global newspapers. He also wrote the book 'Islam without Extremes, a Muslim Case for Liberty'.

While there are no infallible figures in Islam, he said governments will try to use every tool they can get their hands on to maximise power, even by using Islam.

Referring to Perak mufti Harussani Zakaria's (left) remark that it is halal to spill the blood of those who protest against the government, Mustafa said this is unacceptable to Islamic scholars around the world.

Mustafa said protesters are merely expressing their opinions and "not attacking anyone or committing a crime or violating the the law".

"The law is not about not criticising the government but more of not harming the people or their property," he said.

Under an authoritarian government, those in power try to solidify their position by using Islamic arguments or verses of the Quran to force citizens to obey the rules, he said.

"Every government tries to do this. We should not give in to their propaganda and we should not allow our allegiance to religion to turn into blind obedience to anyone," he said.

'Success through freedom'

Mustafa also commented on the tussle over the use of 'Allah' between the Malay-language edition of Catholic weekly The Herald and the government.

The weekly has since been requested by the Home Ministry to stop publishing articles on its court case and dispute over the use of 'Allah' by non-Muslims.

Saying that such notions are unacceptable to him, Mustafa said Christians in Turkey have been using the word but Muslims there do not feel threatened.

Islam is not exclusive to anyone, he said, and neither is it the property of Malays, Arabs or Turks.

He observed that the problem in Malaysia is due to the confusion of 'national' and 'religious' identity, that Malays are all Muslims.

"Over the past two centuries, Muslims have been attacked or they have constantly felt threatened by western or cultural imperialism and colonialism, which has made them very defensive, sometimes reactionary," he noted.

"But that is a vicious cycle. If you are that defensive and that reactionary and protective, you cannot unleash the dynamics of your own well-being. You need more diversity, freedom of thought, more debate in order to move on," he said.

"Others are successful because of these freedoms - creativity comes through freedom. Free thought, free ideas, free participation, free flow, that leads to success. There may be Christian missionaries and propaganda but if Muslims are confident of their faith, they should not feel threatened.

"Why do we think that we would be confused if someone utters the name of Allah? Why are they not confused, but we are?"

He advised Muslims to remain steadfast in their faith but not to be confused with bigotry, closed- mindedness and parochialism as these will block the community's progress.

Knowledge of secular thoughts, other faiths and traditions would strengthen the faith of Muslims through arguments and discourse, he said.

In the Internet era, Muslim children are not spared western influences like Hollywood movies and porn, he said. Therefore, it becomes more important to teach them basic Islamic values so they can discern right from wrong.

"We feel that since we were given God's revelations, we are a more mature religion. So, we should act like mature people," he added.

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