

Reimagining the Islamic world: Quests for vibrancy and prosperity

By Thomas Fuller

KUALA LUMPUR: Can the Muslim world be rebranded? Led by Malaysia and Indonesia, political and business leaders from Asia, North Africa and the Middle East vowed at a conference here Monday to reshape the image of Islamic countries, aiming to replace visions of poverty and violence with vibrancy, trade and, ultimately, prosperity.

"We must change our partners' perception of the Muslim world," said Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the president of Indonesia, who gave the keynote address.

"We must change their attitudes toward us from something negative or indifferent — if not hostile — to some-

thing positive and enthusiastic."

Whether or not the mission is successful, the meeting here of the third annual World Islamic Economic Forum put on display the frustration that many leaders in Muslim countries have over being associated with corrupt, dysfunctional governments and intractable conflict.

The speakers, including government ministers from Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, hardly mentioned the Palestinians; Iraq or terrorism.

Instead, they talked about job creation, streamlining bureaucracy and strengthening intellectual property rights.

By holding the conference in Kuala

Conference dreams of a Muslim rebirth

Lumpur, its organizers hoped to underline the successes of Malaysia and neighboring Indonesia in marrying moderate Islam with modernity.

Both are multicultural countries, a contrast to the rigid Wahhabi tradition of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, for instance.

In a series of speeches notable for their self-deprecation, leaders castigated Muslim societies for neglecting education and for offering copious rhetoric but little action.

"We as leaders of the Muslim world

need to take responsibility for ourselves and our citizens," said Sheik Saud bin Saqr al-Qasimi, the crown prince and deputy ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, a part of the United Arab Emirates. "We need to make sure that our young people can find jobs."

Shortfalls in education in Muslim countries "make people vulnerable to misinformation," he added.

Yudhoyono said Muslim countries needed to change what is taught in madrasas, the Islamic schools that have been criticized for being heavy on religious training and light on science, technology and the humanities.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia, the host of the gathering, said Muslims needed to

steer their populations toward the "idea of work as worship."

"We must break the shackles of rigidity and dogma that currently envelop Islam," he said, restating the theme that underlies his policies in Malaysia. "We must go beyond rituals and ceremonies."

Abdullah and Yudhoyono both said that the Muslim world should leverage its control over the world's oil resources — more than two-thirds of the world's energy needs are provided by Muslim countries, Yudhoyono said — to gain access to knowledge and technology.

"The wealth is there for us to invest," Abdullah said.

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Muslims weigh how to lift up their world

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Despite a similar name and logo, the World Islamic Economic Forum has no connection to the annual meeting of business leaders in Davos, Switzerland.

The Islamic forum, which met for the first time in 2005, expanded this year to include meetings dedicated to the role of women and young people in Muslim countries.

By focusing on business both among Muslim countries and with the wider world, Islamic countries can help play down the stubborn issues that divide Muslims and non-Muslims, said P. Miles Young, the chairman of Ogilvy & Mather in Asia, which co-sponsored the conference.

"Business itself is a bridge for what seem to be two competing worlds or two clashing civilizations," Young said. "It is through business that there is common ground."

The notion of the "Muslim world" as an economic bloc is still mainly wishful thinking. Muslim countries conduct very little trade among themselves. Defined as the 56 member nations of the Islamic Development Bank, Muslim countries send 51.5 percent of their exports to industrialized countries, compared with just 13.5 percent to fellow Muslim nations, according to the bank.

Perhaps for that reason, some participants found the emphasis on Muslim solidarity retrograde and unhelpful.

Hakima el-Haite Mounir, director of the largest waste management company in Morocco, said the focus at the conference on Muslim solidarity could backfire.

"Aren't we moving backward in putting up religious boundaries?" she asked.

"We should all be trying to remove barriers, to move against the segregation of the world."

Khalida Azbane Belkady, director of Groupe Azbane, a cosmetics company also based in Morocco, said the emphasis should be more squarely on business — whether among Muslims or non-Muslims.

"We are Muslims and we are women," she said.

"But maybe we should stop talking about Muslim this-and-that and just get to work."

'Every year, year in and year out, women get to eat only the humble pies.'

The meeting of women business leaders, which took place Sunday, was a feisty session that could have been mistaken for a convention of American feminists in the 1970s.

Norraesah Mohamad, a Malaysian who chaired the meeting, said Muslim countries neglected women entrepreneurs.

"The playing field is not about to be leveled, not soon enough," she said, adding: "We are quantitatively and qualitatively better than the guys in universities and the workplace."

Women face difficulty getting financing for projects, Norraesah said. "Every year, year in and year out, women get to eat only the humble pies," she said.

Suryani Sidik Mokti, head of a metal-working company in Indonesia, Prima Group, said women in business were getting more respect today.

She recalled early in her career inquiring at a bank about interest rates for a loan her company was seeking. "They said, 'Ma'am, this is too difficult for you. Why don't you bring your husband?'"

Illustrating the moderate form of Islam practiced in Malaysia and Indonesia today, the trade ministers in those countries, the Indonesian finance minister and Malaysia's central bank governor are all women.

Suryani said she found it logical that women would have these top jobs.

Traditionally, she said, men have handed over their paychecks to their wives, who pay the bills and budget for expenses.

"In day-to-day life women are managing finances in their houses," Suryani said. "Now it's happening at the level of the country."