

Islam Hadhari

It gives me great privilege to stand before you and say a few words here today in one of India's great central universities. It is an honour indeed to be conferred this Degree of Doctor of Letters (*Honoris Causa*). I would like to record my appreciation to Jamia Millia Islamia for giving me the distinction of addressing all of you this afternoon.

I stand before you as a person of various roles. I am a Muslim and a leader who governs a multiethnic and multireligious nation. Malaysia is peaceful and growing rapidly, and by the grace of Allah, its people of many different ethnicities and faith live in harmony, joined by mutual respect and understanding. We see strength in our diversity and enjoy the unity of an extraordinary nation that has succeeded in developing itself in a relatively short history since gaining independence.

I speak also as the chairperson of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, or OIC, a group which gives voice to 57 Muslim majority nations. As chairperson, I have the responsibility of expressing their grievances and their aspirations, and to reflect their sentiment.

It is in these two capacities that I speak today on the subject of Islam and in particular, on the state of affairs of my faith and Malaysia's own experience of the reality of Islam and Muslims in our own context, as well as that of an ever-changing world, fraught with challenges and developments that reverberate even here in India.

The sheer weight of the problems facing the Muslim world today is tremendous. Many Muslim countries are synonymous with poverty and illiteracy; some stand out because of oppression and injustice. Muslims do not have a global common voice that is taken seriously. The UNDP's Arab Human Development Report for 2003, which covers a region synonymous with Islam, noted that Arab societies continue to face the critical problems of widening gaps in freedom, the

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status of women, and knowledge. Islam's emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge especially, evident to all who have read the pages of the Quran, is poorly reflected in many Muslim societies where standards in education are dismal.

Corruption is another major problem in the Muslim world. We fare extremely poorly in transparency international's corruption perception index. Of the 145 countries surveyed in 2004, Muslim countries barely made the top 30. More than half of the last 10 rankings are occupied by Muslim countries.

While Muslims cannot just point to others for the state of their societies today, exacerbating these grim conditions is a harsh reality of a global order that continue to oppress, obliterate and vilify millions of Muslims worldwide.

Many instances of oppression are common knowledge. The issue of Palestine and the plight of its people – denied the right to land, sovereignty and self-governance – remains unresolved. Also dominating the headlines is Iraq – a country unilaterally invaded, where the climate of fear created by a doctrine of pre-emption and predominance, is proving to be as oppressive as the cruel dictatorship by which Saddam Hussein once ruled.

Islam and Muslims continue to be portrayed as 'violent', 'extreme' and 'intolerant'. The post-September 11 world has perpetuated a negative Islamic stereotype, well-documented and now clear for all to see. The current perception of Islam continues to be fed by hidden assumptions and distortions of fact that premise even the most 'neutral' coverage of Muslims and events around them. I quote – there also seems to have been a strange revival of canonical, though previously discredited, orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white, people – ideas which have achieved a startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West – unquote. What the late scholar and political activist, Edward said once, written nearly 10 years ago still holds true to this day.

To their credit, some Western leaders have repeatedly stressed that 'this is not a war against Islam'. But this appears trivial when popular sentiment is driven by a sensationalist Western media that focuses almost exclusively on extremist discourse. As diverse as the Christian world, this great monotheistic religion is treated as a monolith, with few exceptions, despite clear differences among Muslims throughout the globe. 'The nuances of the debate within the Muslim world are totally ignored. The breadth of different opinions among Muslims is unheard of. The many progressive endeavours and experiments underway in Muslim societies go unreported. It is against this background that I would like to share with you, a little of what is happening at my home.

There are a few key areas in which the Muslim world needs to prioritise. First is a commitment to good governance, which must be demonstrated through best



practices, righteous conduct and moral leadership, accountability, justice and the rule of law. Any Muslim leader assuming power in their country should be reminded of the Quranic verse in Surah An Nisaa verse 58: which means 'Allah doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice'.

Another key area and a considerable challenge, is the encouragement of reform and renewal in Islamic thought. I have always believed that by opening up the discursive space in the Muslim world, we enrich our intellectual tradition and directly challenge the extremist doctrines that have been linked to Islam over the last few years. While we recognise that rituals are important, that the written word of the Quran is sacred, we also believe that as Muslims we must understand the spirit and ultimate objectives of our religion.

In the past, and most regrettably some instances in present day, Shariah has been subjected to socio-political influences resulting in laws bearing the name of Islam, but in fact run against the spirit and principles of the faith. The renewal of Islamic thought must, I believe, be an ongoing process, ensuring the universality of the message and guarding its pluralism and diversity. It must not be allowed to be ossified or fossilised by blind acceptance of traditional thought and opinion. Narrow, literalist interests that invoke the name of God must not be allowed to manipulate the faith and prevent Islam from being a religion for all time, as intended by Allah SWT.

I have therefore repeatedly called for the relevance of contemporary Ijtihad – that is, the effort made by a Muslim jurist or scholar to deduce a law or opinion, not self-evident from the sources of the Shariah. The problems that contemporary Muslim societies are confronted with today are not the problems of the 6th century, and the solutions we need today do not lie with the notion of a Shariah purportedly final and complete 1400 years ago.

The notion that the Islamic concept of law is absolute and hence immutable has resulted in intellectual inertia among some scholars. Some have become little more than apologists for Islam. We must remember that Islam was once the dominant worldview because its scholars responded to scientific discoveries and to contemporary challenges and modernisation. Muhammad Iqbal, in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* wrote: 'Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why the attitude of finality in the legal schools should be maintained. The teaching of the Quran that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessor, should be permitted to solve its own problems'.

As far as Malaysia is concerned, I humbly believe that there are lessons to impart and perhaps a model to showcase of a fairly successful, modern Muslim country.

Muslims in Malaysia have tried to walk the middle path – the path of moderation – and we believe that we are enjoined to find success both in the hereafter and in this world, giving equal emphasis to Fardu Kifayah and Fardu'ain.

Over the past two decades, we have seen the rapid rise of Islamist movements. While many are apolitical and focus more on social activities, many others have become political and participate in the legitimate political frameworks of their respective countries; and they have become synonymous with, what is referred to as, political Islam. They participate in politics, yet they envision a goal which may be very different from the political system and participatory democracy of a plural society.

In my country, the opposition pan-Malaysia Islamic party, popularly known as PAS, has politicised religion to the extent that it claims a monopoly on Islam. They canvass for votes by telling villagers that they would be assured of heaven if they vote for PAS. After the 1999 general elections – which saw the biggest gains ever made by PAS – some in my party thought that we had to become more Islamist than the opposition, even though my party openly stands for an inclusive and progressive Islam. This was, of course, a very dangerous game of one-upmanship. While Malaysian political choices are to some extent influenced by the issue of religiosity, what are actually more important to the voters are the issues of good governance and broad-based economic growth.

When I became Prime Minister last year, I embarked on some modest reforms in order to address the grievances which led to our erosion of support in 1999. I took a hard line on corruption. I ordered an extensive reform programme for the police force. I stressed on the need to have credible and independent institutions of government, like the judiciary. I embarked on balancing the budget and redirecting government spending on needy socio-economic programmes. I pushed for a more effective education system. I launched an initiative to develop biotechnology and to modernise the agricultural sector so that the rural areas – which are predominantly Muslim – would not be left behind.

By the grace of Allah, the electorate responded. This year, my party was returned with its biggest majority since independence. We were able to win back the state we lost in 1999. We have demonstrated that we can roll back the Islamists, not by engaging in a 'holier-than-thou' contest, but by addressing the root causes of anger and frustration. I put it to you, ladies and gentlemen, that the issues we addressed are similar to those in many other Muslim countries. If you confront and deal with these issues, you can prevail over Islamists in a democratic contest.

It cannot be denied that Islam has become an increasingly powerful imperative for Muslims to act today. In Malaysia, we believe that this compulsion to act because of religion can be directed towards good, towards progress and towards



development. We call this approach Islam Hadhari – literally ‘Civilisational Islam’ – or an approach towards a progressive Islamic civilisation. It is an approach that values substance over form. It is an approach that seeks to make Muslims understand that progress is enjoined by Islam. It is an approach that is compatible with modernity and yet firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam.

Islam Hadhari is an approach that emphasises development, consistent with the tenets of Islam, and focuses on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve this via the mastery of knowledge; the development of the individual and the nation; the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system; and the pursuit of integrated and balanced development to develop pious and capable people, with care for the environment and protection of the weak and disadvantaged.

Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. It is not a new teaching nor is it a new Mazhab or denomination. Islam Hadhari is an effort to bring the Ummah back to basics, to return to the primacy of values and principles, as prescribed in the Quran and the Hadith that form the foundation of Islamic civilisation. It posits 10 fundamental principles which Muslim countries must demonstrate:

- i. First, faith and piety in Allah;
- ii. Second, a just and trustworthy government;
- iii. Third, a free and independent people;
- iv. Fourth, a vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
- v. Fifth, balanced and comprehensive economic development;
- vi. Sixth, a good quality of life for the people;
- vii. Seventh, protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
- viii. Eighth, cultural and moral integrity;
- ix. Ninth, safeguarding natural resources and the environment; and
- x. Tenth, strong defence capabilities.

It is in accordance with these principles that our laws and policies have been and continue to be formulated and reviewed – that is laws and policies that represent the best interests of society (Maslaha). And it is through our consistent and continuing record of improving governance for the people, and by practising and observing a high commitment to public accountability, that Malaysia offers a modest working model of renewal, reform and the beginnings of a renaissance in the Muslim world. I certainly do not wish to assume that our experiences are a ‘one-size fits all’ prescription, and I am well aware that different countries need different solutions to their problems. But I do believe that Malaysia can offer interesting insights into the building blocks of a progressive and modern Muslim nation.

Malaysia’s experience and our promotion of Islam Hadhari also clearly demonstrate a progressive attitude towards relations with non-Muslim

minorities and between genders. Our approach does not threaten the rights of non-Muslims. In fact, we celebrate the diversity of our respective cultures and heritage. Those of other faiths in Malaysia, although a minority, have never been persecuted and there is no tolerance in my administration for discrimination and prejudice against any religious group. I am a Muslim, but I am also a leader of all Malaysians – whatever their faith.

Similarly, we have tried to ensure that the rights of women are protected and that they fulfil their potential without having to face artificial barriers constructed in the name of Islam. We know Islam to be just and fair, and that it honours the position and rights of women. But there are clear instances of prejudices being cloaked in religious teachings in the Muslim world, aimed at passing off gender discrimination as the accepted norm. This will simply not do. But beyond the issue of gender justice, there are other compelling reasons to set the situation right. Some of our best and brightest students are women. If society does not allow them to fulfil their potential, then we will not be getting the best people for the right positions. Again, I have driven this objective as a key plank in the promotion of Islam Hadhari.

In our efforts to ensure that Malaysia will continue to be a platform for thriving Islamic thought, as well as remain to be an ongoing testament to the truth that Islam embraces progress and modernity, Malaysia will invite scholars of Islam from all over the world to initiate the process of intellectual reform and renewal. This will not be easy. We will face opposition by those who believe that they – and only they – can participate in religious discourse. It is for this reason that this effort must not be exclusivist in nature. While I believe that progressive or modernist thinkers must be given the space and opportunity to propagate their views, it must be done within the context of a dialogue within Islam involving those with more conservative or literalist leanings.

Commentators in the West who have picked up on the nuances of this debate in the Muslim world have categorised it as a ‘battle’ within Islam between the moderates and the conservatives. I would rather fashion it as a dialogue. A battle would only result in a zero-sum game. Instead, we must get scholars who are trained in the traditions to interact with scholars trained in the modern disciplines in an open environment, in order to produce a lively and constructive debate.

What is needed in the Muslim world is a meeting of minds in order to expand the space for debate and discussion. When I was invited to give a talk at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in October, I offered Malaysia as the focal point for promoting a more open and diverse Islamic discourse. I reiterate that offer here today. Our universities will work together with institutions around the world, and I welcome the Jamia Millia Islamia to promote a critical dialogue that needs to take place within the Muslim world. Whilst we continue to strive



to find common ground with people of other faiths, we must also open up the discourse within the Ummah. It is my hope that this initiative will find a network of similar experiments around the world, so that its objective can be multiplied to as many countries, reaching as many Muslims as possible.

I thank you once again for this great honour of being conferred the Degree of Doctor of Letters (*Honoris Causa*) from your distinguished university. I hope that the opportunity that we have to exchange views today will lead to a sharper focus, to greater clarity and to stronger determination for us to do our part in changing the current circumstances of the Ummah.

