

Malaysia stands out in the Muslim world for merging Islam and modernity
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Downtown Kuala Lumpur simultaneously reassures and unnerves me. I take comfort in the many outward manifestations of progress, tolerance and pluralism: a modern economy, an educated and urbane work force, and the ethnically and religiously diverse populations peacefully coexisting. On the trendy Bintang Walk shopping street, Arab tourists relax with their families—men choose shorts over dishdashas, and their wives abandon full-faced nikab for loose head scarves. Such is the moderating effect of Malaysia.

Malaysia is an aberration in the Muslim world. In October, when Malaysia assumes the chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Muslim nations will find themselves led by a country with which they have little in common. To the Middle East, where Islam is conflated with an Arabic identity and whose countries view themselves as the custodians of the Islamic faith and the defender of the ummah (community of the faithful), Malaysia is an outsider with a large non-Muslim population.

We stand out for other reasons, too. Ours is an open and diverse economy rapidly transforming itself into one that is knowledge-based. We have been a democracy since independence, and are progressively strengthening our institutions of governance and rule of law. We have invested heavily in education, poverty eradication and rural development, uplifting the living standards and dignity of all Malaysians. Women occupy the highest ranks of decision making and even outnumber men in our universities. This has all been achieved not in spite of but because we are a Muslim country. The success of modern Malaysia in building a vibrant economy and a cohesive national identity from a patchwork of cultures has shown that Islam guides its believers toward knowledge, progress, tolerance, good governance, the promotion of human dignity, and global justice.

Malaysia has been able to succeed where other Muslim countries still fall short in large part due to how we understand our faith. We have eschewed a literalist and obscurantist understanding of Islam—which focuses exclusively on the prohibitive and punitive aspects—for a progressive orientation that does not merely give primacy to the black letter but also to the broader objectives of Shari'a laws that guide such fields as justice, welfare and equality. Our understanding of religion is both textual and contextual, drawing on the eternal principles of Islam to understand contemporary problems. We guard against the intellectual straitjacketing of Islamic thought by those who ignore current realities and call for atavistic solutions. Free from the pursuit of rigid dogma, we have been able to overcome problems that continue to plague the majority of Muslims elsewhere—poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and oppression. It is the provision of health care, housing and human-resource development that consumes our attention, not the minutiae of the hudud, the Islamic penal code. It is this understanding of Islam—at once able to meet the demands of modernity as well as providing a spiritual bulwark against avarice, depravity and anomie—that has underpinned Malaysia's success.

Yet I remain unnerved because there are signs that this progressive understanding of Islam in Malaysia is under threat. Beneath the high-tech façade of Kuala Lumpur, there are convulsions. Political Islam has taken advantage of heightened religious consciousness and tries to convince Muslims that the state of affairs in the country is anathema to the "authentic" vision of Islam. Self-appointed clerics increasingly claim monopoly over religious discourse, crowding out voices of reform and progress. The growing conservatism that we

are seeing is the thin end of the wedge. If left unchallenged, it will germinate into a radical and reactionary force that rejects modernity, generates intolerance and imprisons the minds of Muslims behind the bars of dogma and blind imitation.

Resisting this will be the greatest challenge for Malaysia in the years ahead. Mindful that the rise of radical Islamic politics elsewhere has coincided with the loss of credibility of the incumbent regimes, Malaysia's political leadership must ensure that it continues to promote justice, equality and, most importantly, freedom for all Malaysians. Neither can we abdicate our efforts in reconstructing Islamic thought along progressive lines. Malaysia has been the exception that proves that Islam is as relevant today as it was 14 centuries ago. If Malaysia surrenders to rigid conservatism and blind fanaticism, the hopes of Muslims around the world for the rebirth of a modern and enlightened Islamic civilization will be irreparably damaged.

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