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" MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY:
ROLE OF MUSLIM NATIONS "

I would like to thank His Highness Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Prime Minister, and also the organisers of this conference for the invitation to give a talk on a subject that is of great interest to the Malaysian Government and I believe to a lot of Muslim Governments and Muslim people. This subject has taken on an aura of urgency because the world is changing fast, physically, technologically and in terms of ideas and concepts on human relations, human rights, and the relations between the peoples of the world and between their countries. There is no way we can isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, nor erect barriers against our neighbours. Borders are being made irrelevant both physically and philosophically. We cannot anymore prevent others including our enemies from crossing our borders. If their armies cannot cross, their ideas and their creed can, with impunity. And these ideas and creed are as effective in subverting and hegemonising as were their armies and occupation forces in the past.

2. Remember it did not take a full war of conquest to put practically the whole Muslim world under Western rule. They easily used the Muslims themselves, including the religious extremists and nationalists who claimed to be fighting for Islam, to ensure the success of their conquests.

3. In the aftermath of the Second World War they gave up their Empires, including their Muslim colonies. It was not an act of generosity. It was not because they had ceased to be acquisitive. It was simply because they were fighting each other; the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc and they feared rebellions and defections.

4. Now they are not divided anymore. One bloc has triumphed and triumphed completely. They no longer fear defection to the other side. There is no more other side. There is therefore no more reason to

placate anyone. They must re-establish their dominance over the world. As it happened it is the dominance of the capitalists.

5. Military conquest is wasteful and costly, especially in terms of the lives they may lose. But conquest can be by other means, equally effective, but less costly. Indeed it can be profitable right from the word go. By all means have the military back-up, have the capacity to instil fear of their destructive powers. But use other means that are available.

6. Today's other means is economic strength, money in short. Use money to undermine nationalism and to dominate. And back it with ideas; ideas which are so powerful that even those steeped in religion and the values and culture that it creates, will not be able to resist or to reject these semi-religions.

7. The most powerful ideas originating from the West are democracy and human rights. Along with these have come the ideas of one world, of globalisation, of a world without borders. Who do you think will rule this single world? Certainly not us, the Muslims. Yes, we will be told we will have a share but that would be pure lip-services. We, along with the other peoples of the South will be the subject people, working to enrich and to empower the rich North more and more fully, more and more permanently.

8. After we Muslims have received the message of Islam, the only new ideas which have come our way have all come from the rich North. Our faith has been assailed with such ideas and ideologies as Republicanism, Capitalism, Socialism, Communism and a lot of others. If we care to examine all these so-called perfect solutions to the woes of human society we will find that eventually they all prove to be failures, that the very people who conceive and espouse them would lose their faith and enthusiasm and that finally they would be discarded as harmful. But while they were enamoured with these ideas they would not hesitate to force them upon the world, by every means at their disposal.

9. The same thing will one day happen to democracy. The idea will be embellished, enlarged, reinterpreted again and again. All and sundry must embrace democracy as the perfect system for the good of mankind. And then one day they will become disillusioned, will see the faults in it increasingly and will finally reject this once great idea.

10. We have had no part in the formulation of these ideas, nor with the periodical reinterpretation and

enlargement of their application. We have to react to these ideas. Unable to reject the logic and universal acceptance of these ideas we are forced to try and justify them according to Islam. Quite naturally we will fail because our religion must insist on justice and morality and not the absolute freedom leading to immorality now being advocated by the West.

11. Islam is faced with this ideological challenge and the challenges of more new ideas which will come out of the North. The capacity of Islam to come out victorious in the ideological war is worsened by our own insistence and emphasis on form rather than substance. We are carried away by our interpretation of the 'Islamic' dress for example rather than the mere need to cover our body as required by Islam. We stress the manner with which trials should be carried out and the punishment meted rather than the justice that Islam promotes.

12. We talk about the need for Muslims to be strong in defence of themselves but we eschew the study of the sciences needed to enable us to produce modern weapons ourselves. Instead we stress religious studies and religious piety in order to gain merit in the next world. In the process we neglect the injunction of Islam to always be equipped to defend ourselves and to put fear in the hearts of the enemy.

13. It is because we misinterpret or wrongly emphasise the teachings of Islam, it is because we stress form rather than substance that we Muslims find ourselves unable to meet the challenges of the Industrial Age and now the Information Age. We should have learnt the lessons from our failure to participate in the Industrial Revolution and should prepare ourselves to participate in the Information Revolution, but we are not.

14. Yet we Muslims are no less capable of acquiring knowledge, of innovations and inventions, of spewing new ideas as well as the others. We are as capable of governing ourselves well and of growing and strengthening our countries as anyone else. We know what we need to do. Indeed our religion gives us all the necessary guidance. If we are today lagging behind, disdained and oppressed by others it is because we have actually forsaken the true teachings of our religion and returned to our pre-Islamic ways, feuding with each other, closing our minds to modern knowledge and ignoring reality, deceiving ourselves that we are better than others when we are not.

15. Let us take just one of the most important teachings of Islam - that all Muslims are brothers.

Can we honestly say that we behave towards each other as brothers? We are enjoined to seek knowledge even in China. But we are not. Instead we interpret seeking knowledge as learning about religion only. At the time of the Prophet could we learn about Islam in China? Obviously the knowledge that we should seek in China is not Islamic. Probably it was about making gunpowder, paper, waterwheels, fine porcelain etc.

16. If we are to face the challenges of the 21st Century, the first thing we must do is to put our own houses in order. We have to administer our countries well, promoting stability and economic growth, using the wealth we generate to build needed infrastructures and to equip ourselves with all the skills of the Information Age and of the Industrial Age as well. We must always be at the cutting edge of technology.

17. To do all these we need to be rational. It is understandable that we should feel frustrated and angry. Everywhere we see Muslims oppressed. They are frequently massacred, their countries forced to accept hostile foreign dominance which render them independent only nominally. We are helpless to defend ourselves or our Muslim brothers anywhere. We see them being shot and killed virtually before our eyes and there is nothing we can do about it.

18. We appeal for justice to those who talk incessantly of justice and we see them ignoring us. Human rights, justice, fairplay we find to be only meaningless words and our anger overflows. In frustration we resort to terrorism. But our frustration only worsens because we gain nothing from this, only more oppression.

19. We become frustrated with our own countries and our Governments. Why cannot they do something about the oppression and humiliation of the Muslims? We vent our anger against our Governments by more acts of violence and terrorism, this time directed at our own Governments and leaders. Again we gain nothing, only succeed in weakening ourselves further.

20. After years of indiscriminate acts of terrorism what have we to show for the sacrifices that we made? Nothing. We have only brought more oppression and more painful retaliations against us. We have not advanced our cause one iota. We and our own Governments and countries have become weaker.

21. We want quick fixes but there are no quick solutions to our problems. And most of us refuse to believe in the truth of this, in the reality of our failures. We just do not seem able to learn.

22. If we are going to meet the Challenges of the 21st Century, we should pause now and take stock. And having done that calmly and dispassionately we should then set out to plan for our future; not the next year, not the next decade, but the whole century and more for that is how long it will take to achieve any degree of success.

23. First of all we must go back to the true teachings of Islam, to the al-Quran and the `Hadis'. These teachings had obviously converted the ignorant desert Arabs into a brave and talented people who were able to build in less than 100 years a huge empire extending from Spain in the West to China in the East, to build the greatest civilisation the world had ever seen. If Islam could do these for the `Jahiliah', the ignorant ones, there is no reason why it cannot do the same for us now. We are not as ignorant as those feuding Arab tribes.

24. The truth is that we have deviated from the teachings of Islam, we have at times actually rejected it in practical terms. We have grossly abused it. Thus, when we are told to be brothers and to fight only those not of the faith who make us their enemies, we now fight `jihads' against fellow Muslims, declaring them to be infidels when we know they are not. We should be preaching love and brotherhood of fellow Muslims but the learned ones, the political `ulamas' are very fond of preaching hatred of other Muslims who do not accept their teachings and politics and urging holy wars against them, while ignoring completely the non-Muslim enemies who are oppressing Muslims. Indeed by what they preach and do they are actually helping the enemies of Islam.

25. We are enjoined by Islam to be fair and just in the administration of our laws. But we care not for justice and fairness as long as we uphold the process of judgement. In some instances we advocate punishing the victim rather than the criminal. After 1400 years we have still not codified Islamic laws, leaving it to the judge to refer to instances of similar crimes in the past to pass judgement and sentence. For most Muslim countries the due process of law have not been institutionalised, even though Muslim jurists abound in Muslim societies.

26. We are enjoined by the al-Quran to prepare the means to defend Islam and the Muslim `ummah'. We are told to maintain warhorses, swords etc. That may put fear in the hearts of the foes of the Muslims in the time of the Prophet. That will not work today. We need guns and tanks, fighter planes and battleships

etc. But we are not truly capable of producing these weapons. We may be licensed to produce them but by and large we have to buy them, sometimes from the very people who are our foes.

27. If we are really to put fear in their hearts and to be able to defend ourselves then we must have the capability to devise and produce these arms ourselves, upgrading them to keep pace or to be ahead of the rest of the world. To do these we must acquire the necessary scientific and technical knowledge, industrial skills and capacity and management know-how. But we don't have these because we are not encouraged by our religious leaders to acquire these knowledge and skills. They want us to study religion instead because this will gain us merit in the next world. That we fail to protect the Muslims as enjoined by the al-Quran and therefore we lose merit and we actually sin does not seem to bother these people.

28. If we go back to the true teachings of Islam on the need to be able to defend ourselves, we cannot but agree on the need to acquire knowledge of the sciences and the technologies which will enable us to design and produce the weapons for our protection. Indeed if we follow the teachings of Islam we must acquire all the knowledge in all fields to ensure the well-being of the Muslims and the safety of their countries. We should actually be formulating and improving on all the sciences and the skills required for a modern Islamic state where the `ummah' is protected and where they are free of poverty, having adequate good food, able to clothe themselves and live in decent dwellings, respected and even looked up to by the rest of the world.

29. Today Muslim countries without exception are being pressured to switch to democracy because this is the current ideology. We must not forget that the West had come up with many systems, ideologies and ideas which they eventually gave up because they all failed.

30. For a long time the West was extremely feudal believing in the Divine Rights of Kings, in the King could do no wrong. Then they found that the Kings abused their power and they revolted against their Kings and set up Republics. The Republics did not work well and they recalled their Kings. Then they conceived the idea of democracy and majority rule, believing that the majority would know how best they should be ruled. But the majority oppressed the minority.

31. Then they talk of minority rights and even the rights of individuals. Today we are seeing the

minority and the individuals ignoring the rights of the majority and their democracy has become immoral and oppressive to the majority. Indeed democracy causes a great deal of instability in many countries. Political parties mushroom and use bribery, corruption, threats and economic disruptions in order to fight each other. Development cannot take place as everything is politicised. The energy and the wealth of the whole nation is wasted in political infighting between numerous political parties set up for nothing more than the furtherance of the political ambitions of various aspirants for the highest post in the country.

32. Today democracy does not work even in the most experienced democracies of the West. What is working now is money, not majority will. No one can win elections without money. The cost of campaigns is so high that poor aspirants can get nowhere unless he is supported by people with the money. In the end it is the wealthy who will rule the country, not directly perhaps, but as effectively as if they are sitting in the Chief Executive's chair.

33. The abuses and distortions of the democratic system will go on until one day it is discarded in favour of a new perfect system. This is the natural history and evolution of the various political systems of the West. They emerge, they are embraced, they are embellished, interpreted and reinterpreted until they become completely different from the original. Then they lead to abuses, more and more with the passage of time. Then they are discarded. Thus Feudalism, Republicanism, Socialism and Communism. Now Capitalism is triumphant as it rides on the back of democracy. But already the distortions are showing up. Eventually democracy, liberalism, the free market will all be discarded.

34. Muslim countries should not be in a hurry to embrace democracy. We really don't understand how it works, especially liberal democracy, and it will do us more damage than whatever system that we practice in our countries. It is not the system that matters. It is good governance by good people that we need. And feudal kings, even dictators have provided and can provide good governance. Indeed benign kings and dictators, conscious of their duty, adhering to the teachings of the religion can provide better governments than elected Presidents bent on maintaining popularity at all costs. The only thing good about democracy is that theoretically at least, we can change Governments without violence.

35. Good Governments is not beyond us Muslims. We need a professional civil service, a professional

police force and a professional defence force. They can all be trained and installed with the right spirit and the proper sense of duty to the nation. Rules and regulations, rewards and punishment can be devised to ensure that there is minimal corruption or abuse. Systems of monitoring performances can be put in place in order to maximise the achievements of the Government.

36. Under a good honest leader, be he a king or a Prime Minister or a President, helped by advisers and experts, a country can develop to a high level. It can become stable, peaceful, wealthy and fully able to deal with all challenges, ideological or material. It can become sophisticated in every way, able to compete in every field. Being a Muslim country will not prevent this from being achieved.

37. If the Muslim countries are going to play a role in this century it must first establish good Governments dedicated to developing the countries to achieve developed country status. We are not going to be able to do this overnight. It will take time, a lot of time, but it is possible. Islam enjoins upon us to be patient. There is nothing inherent in Islam or in the Muslims to prevent them from achieving this.

38. Even as we strive towards establishing stable and peaceful Muslim countries, we should be preparing ourselves to deal with the challenges that will be coming our way. We are now already in the Information Age. It is going to transform our lives completely. We have to accept that there is no way we can isolate and insulate ourselves. We are going to be assailed by information, both good and bad, and those which can undermine our faith. We will have to strengthen our Islamic moral strength not by appealing to blind faith but by reason and logic. Certainly we must not try to ignore what is happening around us. We must know that what is bad will weaken and destroy us but what is good will give us strength and success. And knowing this we must resolve to reject what is bad and extol and practice what is good as enjoined upon us by Islam.

39. Mastery of the sciences and the technologies should be easy if we are not prevented from learning them or harassed by the theologians. I am sure that given the opportunity Muslim scholars will once again dominate the world. They will not only master all the knowledge extant but will develop new knowledge. Best of all their faith will bring morality into the application of the knowledge that they acquire.

40. All this while Muslims must eschew aggressiveness and thoughtless violence. As good Muslims we must seek

peace and seek to live in peace with the rest of the world. I am absolutely sure that the oppression of the Muslims will cease once the Muslims and their countries are as well developed as the best developed countries of the world. We must of course be capable of defending ourselves with our own weapons but they should never be used for blatant aggression. We must instead play a role together with other countries in the maintenance of peace in the world.

41. Today many Muslim countries are very rich but they are not categorised as developed. The reason is clear. They do not have the industrial and commercial capacities of the developed countries.

42. On the other hand there are many Muslim countries which are extremely poor. They have mostly to depend on the charity of the non-Muslims. Few Muslim countries have foreign aid programmes even for Muslim countries.

43. But should the Muslim countries succeed in establishing good Governments and developing themselves, they should not help only the poor Muslim countries. Just as the non-Muslims help Muslim countries, we should be prepared to help all poor countries.

44. In a world that is so extremely rich, there really should not be any poor countries. We can blame the people of these countries for their own poverty but blaming them will not make them rich. The rich of the world, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, must help the poor to enrich themselves. This is entirely possible. We should not be proselytising but we must correct their wrong impressions of Islam as being an anachronism given to violent and irrational behaviours. It is the duty of Muslims to give Islam a good image even if it gains us nothing. But I believe it will benefit us a lot as we seek to play a role in world affairs in the 21st Century.

45. Muslims must make up for the mistakes in the past which leave Islam in disrepute. We should not seek to be accepted as partners in the building of a better world. We should prove that it is our right as Muslims and that our countries have as much capacity to influence the direction of world progress as anyone else.

46. We are being forced to accept a globalised world. So far it is an idea crystallised and interpreted by the West. But it is not necessary that their interpretation is right or final. We the Muslim countries must have a say, a big say, in the shaping of

this globalised world.

47. But we must base our stand on the logic of our interpretation rather than merely say that it is based on our faith. Muslims may accept the injunctions of the religion without question but others will not. We must put up our ideas and proposals based on logic and reasoning and on the maximum good that it can bring to the maximum number of people. This should not be too difficult because globalisation as it is presently defined will benefit only the rich few. Indeed the richest will benefit the most and the poorest will get even poorer. Our proposals must be more equitable and fair, aiming at nothing less than the enriching of all the peoples of the world, irrespective of race or religion or geographical location.

48. This is the role that Muslim nations can play and must in the 21st Century. While striving to establish reasonably good relation among Muslim countries, while striving for and adopting good governance and developing their nations; having discarded the senseless expressions of anger and frustrations, the Muslim nations must help contribute towards world peace and prosperity by adopting a rational clear-headed policy in their relation with each other and with the rest of the world. The Muslims and Muslim countries must once again play the role that they played when they built the Great Muslim Civilisation. After achieving this or even while striving to achieve this it is most likely that many of the problems in the relation between Muslim and non-Muslim countries will be resolved.

49. The challenges of the 21st Century will be many and varied. But these challenges can be met and, if not overcome, at least somewhat blunted if the Muslims face them with rationality and resoluteness. In the process the role of the Muslim countries will be defined and recognised.

50. The 21st Century must be made the century of the world where all and everyone, including the Muslims and their countries will prosper and take their proper places as equal partners. Our role is not to be dominated or to dominate but to be equal partners in a richer equitable world that is more rational. Insha-Allah.