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EVENT: THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN THE MODERN STATE

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1. Islam is a religion of peace and moderation. If it does not appear to be so today, it is not because of the teachings of Islam but the interpretations made by those apparently learned in Islam to suit their patrons or their own vested interest.

2. Islam differs from the other monotheistic religions; Judaism and Christianity, because it has no system of priests. Muslims believe that the Hebrew and Christian priests had changed the original religions. They do not want priests to change Islam.

3. But over the centuries those learned in Islam, the ulama, gained such authority over the Muslims laity that many of them tended to use their considerable influence to gain power for themselves. They become like the priests of other religions.

4. The early ulamas were knowledgeable in many disciplines besides Islamic theology. Today political ulamas are only knowledgeable about those parts of the teachings of Islam which seemingly support their political views. Many misinterpret and distort Islam in order to legitimise their political creed. A favourite one is that only ulamas may rule a country, democracy notwithstanding.

5. These political ulamas reject knowledge that is not specifically religious for fear that such people might challenge their authority. Although the early Muslims were great scholars excelling in mathematics and the sciences, today's Muslims are generally backward in most fields of learning. They are also not knowledgeable in Islam.

6. Every time an attempt is made to bring Muslim nations to the development levels of non-Muslim countries, Muslim groups would emerge demanding a "return to Islam." These groups are usually violent and often declare "holy wars" against Muslim Governments trying to develop the country. And because Muslim countries are backward, instead of helping themselves as enjoined by the Quran, they tend to depend solely on divine help, lead by the deviant ulamas.

7. In Malaysia, the Government which I lead is labeled secular and unIslamic by the opposition Pan Malaysia Islamic Party, led by people who claim they are Ulama's. Hatred for the so-called secular Government is fostered from the kindergarten onwards. Fighting against this hate campaign absorbs much of the time of the Government and hinders development.

8. Actually Malaysia is already an Islamic country. The State religion is Islam and Muslims can practise their religion and apply the syariah laws as family laws. All the religious needs of Muslims are provided by the Government. At the same time non-Muslims are free to practise their religions, because this is permitted by Islam. But deviant Muslims still insist that Malaysia is secular and the Government must be overthrown, by violence preferably. The problem that is faced by Muslim countries is actually due to deviation from Islamic fundamentals. People are fond of equating fundamentalists with fanatical and extreme orthodoxy. But the fundamentals of Islam are simple and basic and good. This is because Islam preaches peace and the brotherhood of Muslims.

9. Islam abhors wars of aggression and the killing of innocent people. Defensive wars are permitted but should the enemy sue for peace, Muslims must respond positively. Islam promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills. But the ulama's later interpreted learning as learning religion only. Bereft of non-religious knowledge the great Islamic civilisation declined and faded away.

10. If the Muslims stick to the fundamentals of Islam they would not be divided into a multitude of different sects, race and nations each claiming to be the true Muslim or more Muslim than the others. Not only do they oppose each other but frequently they make war on each other.

11. If Muslims return to the fundamentals of Islam, then the religion will ensure the development of the Muslims and their nations, and their being at peace with each other and with non-Muslim nations. The Muslim nations would be well administered by trained and skillful people and would be able to compete within the global community. They would then have a vested interest in international stability and peace and would want to maintain it.

12. In multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysia we have tried to practise the fundamentals of Islam. But the extremist deviants are always sniping at us. Still Malay Muslims have largely refused to be deviated from the fundamentals of Islam and to give power to self-appointed ulama's incompetent in administration and development.

13. Malaysia is a reasonably developed modern nation not in spite of Islam but because of Islam, because it tries

to adhere to the fundamentals of Islam. Islam is not just a religion. It is a way of life. It should bring about peace, stability and success. It is a way of life which does not neglect spiritual values. It is a way of life which can bring greatness to the followers of Islam, as it once did.

14. If today Islam is perceived to be a religion of backward, violent and irrational people, it is not because of Islam itself as a faith and way of life. It is because Muslims have deviated from the fundamentals of Islam, have abused the teachings in order to justify their personal greed and ambitions.

15. Islam, fundamental Islam, does not have just a role in the Modern Islamic state. In this grossly materialistic age, Islam can instill the spiritual values which distinguish man from the lower creatures. Malaysia is comfortable with Islam and we can become a modern developed country.