

**SPEECH BY THE HON TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
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“Family and Development”

Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Nasser Al Misnad
President of Supreme Council for Family Affairs
State of Qatar;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Nasser Al Misnad, President of Supreme Council for Family Affairs State of Qatar and the Qatar Foundation for this invitation to the conference on “Family and Development”. I am no expert on this subject, but I am very concerned about changing values which can make a mockery of the concept of what constitutes a family and the danger of moral collapse of the human society. I hope what I have to say is relevant.

2. Values and cultures are not static. They change with time and certainly they differ from place to place and between peoples of differing ethnic origins and religious affiliations.

3. Today values are changing so fast that sometimes we are not able to cope. We may not have time to evaluate them and to decide whether to accept or reject them. Yet failure to consider, evaluate and decide may have serious consequences for us.

4. For centuries and millennium even, we have been comfortable with the fairly universal concept of what constitutes family. There are some differences but these differences too remain fairly constant. For most of us a family is made up of a husband and a wife, and the children that they beget. That is the nuclear family.

5. But in many societies the family is extended to include close relatives, the fathers and mothers, the uncles, the cousins, the in-laws of the married couple and some who are quite distant such as second and third cousins. Still the relationship is what may be considered as linked by blood, through the male line and the female line. This would constitute the extended family.

6. In many societies, and among Muslims, polygamy is practiced. In others although only monogamy is allowed, the institution of divorce or death of a partner means that a man may have many wives and a woman many husbands, although not at the same time. The family of a person can therefore include half brothers and half-sisters. Marriages of divorcees can result in the family being made up of the children of the husband, the children of the wife, and the children they beget between them. Then there are the widows and widowers who can get married and have children. All these are legitimate, i.e. sanctioned by law, by religion and custom.

7. Quite obviously many individuals can belong to a family, but always there are clear blood linkages between them. Adopted children may not have this link but society and the law considers them as legitimate members of the family with some qualifications.

8. But of late there have been a number of new definitions of what constitutes a family. Thus couples living together without benefit of marriage, with or without children; single mothers with children from casual sexual relations with one or more individuals and no certainty about paternity; homosexuals and lesbian couples (married in some countries where the law permits

and society recognises) with adopted children or children from casual sex, and even couples made up of brothers and sisters are all to be defined as families. Apparently homosexuality and even incest are now slowly losing their sinful and illegal connotation because of the belief in freedom of the individual.

9. With all these new definitions of what constitutes a family, the norms and laws pertaining to families and their roles in society have become confused and ineffective in bringing about order within human society. A state of moral decay and anarchy now assails human society in the liberal west, among ethnic, nominally Christian Europeans. As usual this decay and erosion begins with a few, is initially opposed, but the opposition will lessen over time as liberal thinkers defend the freedom and the rights of the individuals. As opposition decreases, more would adopt and practice the new freedoms, the new mores. Eventually they will become the norms, the accepted values and culture of the society concerned. Casual liaisons will result in children not knowing who their fathers are. They can be identified through DNA of course. But tracing the fathers may not be easy or successful. And so brothers and sisters may marry unknowingly. Over time such marriages will become common. This in-breeding will propagate some of the negative genes, resulting in diseases and even criminal tendencies. There may be other deleterious side effects.

10. The family had been the pillar which stabilises human society and sustains the good values in human cultures. Parents naturally care for their children and in most instances try to bring them up to be good members of the society they live in. The stronger the family ties and the more extended the family, the more likely will good behavior and good values be propagated and upheld within society. And good values are what determines the stability, the performance and progress of society, the level of civilisation that it attains.

11. Clearly the institution of the family needs to be sustained. But the family must be natural and not made ridiculous and meaningless by pandering to base human desires. The family must be the result of formal and sanctified marriage witnessed and recognised by members of the family and society. They must not be the result of casual and passing liaisons devoid of any love or feelings beyond the fleeting animal desires needing to be satisfied. It is such liaisons which result in new-born babies being thrown into rubbish heaps, often while still alive. Among teenagers this is becoming more frequent even in Muslim societies.

12. For Muslims marriage is not just a custom but is enjoined and regulated by religion. And Islamic laws and practices are just and fair and must contribute to the setting up of good families. Islam of course permits polygamy but there are very clear conditions attached which regulate and ensure that good families will result. We can marry two, three or four but if we cannot be just to our wives, we should marry only one. In Malaysia the majority of Muslims fear that they cannot be just to more than one wife and so polygamy is not common. Besides we are concerned to see that every man and every woman is properly married and is able to raise a good family. Because in our country the numbers of men and women are about equal, the likelihood is that if one man takes four wives, there will be three men without spouses. Men without spouses will be under strong emotional pressures and this can lead to an unstable society with a high rate of sex crimes including sodomy. As Islam abhors disorder in society, men in Malaysia must think carefully whether they are following Islamic injunctions when they marry more than one or they are simply catering to their base desires.

13. But polygamy apart, the institutions of marriage and family in the Muslim society are well set out in the Al-Quran. Muslims need not be influenced by present trends in the so-called liberal and permissive modern society. Indeed Muslims must strive hard to prevent permissive values from undermining the teachings of Islam.

14. I believe honestly that in time there will be chaos in the liberal and permissive societies of the ethnic Europeans. If at the time of the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. the people of the Book

were already considered as having deviated from the teachings of their own religion, today the deviation is much more prevalent and obvious. We see not just gay marriages being solemnised but bishops flout their same-sex partners openly even during religious ceremonies. The response of their societies to their flouting of the teachings of their religions is to legalise them. When crimes are legalised then even those who would not commit the crimes would feel less restrained and would commit the crimes. And the number of prohibitions and sins would be ignored by more and more people, who expect that the prohibitions would be lifted eventually and would be part of the common practice of the society.

15. We know from the Quran and the Bible the story of Sodom; how God destroyed the people who practised sodomy. Modern people would not think of this happening in our times whatever sins and crimes we commit. They would reject any suggestion that the misfortunes which befall them are God's punishment for their sins.

16. And so they reject the suggestion that the advent of a totally new disease, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, is any kind of retribution. We may not want to believe in such worldly retributions. But the fact remains that AIDS is a new disease and was first detected among the homosexuals of California. And now it is the most widespread and serious scourge in the world. Maybe it is not God's retribution but it is certainly linked initially to sinful acts.

17. The unfortunate thing is that the real sinners have learnt how to avoid this retribution, if we can call it that. Others caught in the disaster are not so fortunate. It is well known that in communities with strong traditional values, the tradition itself has helped to spread the disease.

18. In orthodox communities the custom is for wives to submit unquestioningly to their husband's wishes. When the husband is HIV-AIDS-positive, the total submission of the wife, without taking the precautions needed, results in the wife becoming infected and eventually the offsprings becoming infected. And so in these orthodox communities AIDS has spread like wildfire even though sinful acts are proscribed and avoided.

19. What happened may not be regarded as retribution. But still the community cannot be excused. Traditions and customs and the teachings of the religion are meant to be for our good. But it is not the practise of these customs per se which should be upheld unquestioningly. It is the intention or objective of these customs and teachings which should be the focus of our attention. If for some reason the objectives of the customs are not achieved then they should be discarded or modified.

20. Thus Islamic laws are very clearly intended to ensure that justice is done, that justice is the end result. Repeatedly the Quran stresses that when we judge, we must judge with justice. But the common interpretations of the teachings of Islam today stresses the process of judgement and the punishment but not justice. It is assumed that if the process is followed then justice must be the result, even if it is obviously unjust.

21. Thus in cases of rape, for lack of witnesses, the victim may be punished for accusing without witnesses, but the rapist, known and recognised by the victim would go unpunished. If subsequently the victim bears a child, she may be accused of adultery and punished by stoning to death. Punishing the victim and letting the rapist escape punishment is manifestly unjust. Yet Muslim jurists would still insist on the requirement of witnesses to the crime as being of prime importance. If injustice is the result, it has to be accepted. Islam and its teachings are never wrong. But the interpretation which ignores the substance i.e. justice in favour of the form i.e. procedure and punishment, is what gives Islam the wrong image even among its followers, certainly among non-Muslims.

22. Similarly in the case of the customs, traditions and teachings of Islam regarding the family, it is not blind submission of the wife to the husband which Islam advocates. The wife has

rights. Denial of conjugal rights in order to ensure good health for the wife and children is not wrong in Islam. Marriage in Islam is not just about the satisfaction of lust on the part of the husband but also in order to beget children, healthy children to propagate the ummah. If the exercise of conjugal rights results in destroying the family and the ummah then denial would be justified.

23. Unfortunately those responsible for the practice of Islam appear to be ignorant of the seriousness of HIV-AIDS in their community or are in a state of denial. They have not issued a fatwa on this scourge and certainly they have not done anything to enlighten the affected Muslim communities of the need to understand the true teachings of Islam regarding the rights and wrongs in the relations between husband and wife.

24. Although the family is much more intact in the Muslim community, there are already cracks in its structure. Muslims can no longer isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Ease of travel bring Muslims in direct contact with other cultures including the permissive culture that I have mentioned. In any case the television screen and the Video Disc bring the way of life of other peoples and cultures right into the houses of Muslims. Like it or not these exposures must influence our thinking and affect the value system and cultures that we have.

25. In Malaysia we are witnessing the slow collapse of moral values. The parents are now less able to discipline their children and instill good values in them. Without such values they are easily influenced by their exposures to images on the television screen, the Internet and the Video Discs. The result is an increase in juvenile crimes including child rapes, murders and drug addiction. Teen-age pregnancies among school children are now more common.

26. What do we do? Do we try to recreate the world of the 7th Century Muslims or do we try to tackle the problems of a more liberal world through modern ways which are still compatible with Islam. This is the question?

27. Malaysia has chosen the path of modernisation simply because if we don't we will be weak and we will be oppressed by the so-called liberal forces of the world. And they will try to impose their systems, values and culture on us. And all the evil influence of their culture will be totally uncontrollable because we would have no power to resist.

28. We are not sacrificing the family and family values by opting to modernise our society. The deterioration in the moral quality of our society due to the weakening of the family can be slowed down and minimised. But what we have gained in terms of our ability to compete with the rest of the world, to sustain our independence and to prove that Islam is not a hindrance to progress more than compensates for the small deterioration in the family values of our society. The alternative is to return to the 7th century A.D. to be so backward and weak that we will actually be dominated by the powerful and forced to discard our religion and our values.

29. It is therefore timely and important that we Muslims question some of the practices within Muslim societies with regard to family honour for example. We read with distress the killings of daughters and sisters for allegedly dishonoring the family in various ways. Does Islam prescribe this? Where in the Al-Quran or in the verified Hadith do we find clear injunctions or even indirect reference through parables etc that daughters and sisters who in the opinion of the family have dishonoured the name of the family should be killed? This bias against the female members of the family is worse than female infanticide practised by the Jahiliah. It is the result of tribal custom which antedates Islam and should not be linked in any way with the religion.

30. Modernisation is happening everywhere, at a fast or slow rate. The urbanisation which accompanies the process of modernisation affects the value system and culture of the people. The extended family becomes less and less common. Instead families tend to be nuclear and to have fewer children. The living conditions also change. In many cases the new urbanites would

live in single-room slum houses. The parents may both be working. Children would be left without supervision most of the time. They go in and out of the house by themselves.

31. Neighbours in urban areas avoid being involved with each other. They do not want to know what happens to their neighbours. The attitude of neighbours in villages are not found in the towns. And this can lead to all kinds of tragedies. People have been known to die and rot in their slum huts without neighbours being aware that they have been missing, not been seen for days and weeks.

32. Slums are found everywhere in the world, but in the developing countries the conditions of the slums are extremely bad. The huts are likely to be made of discarded wooden or cardboard boxes with no proper sanitation and privacy. Frequently the children would be exposed to the sexual activities of the parents. And frequently also the father may rape daughters.

33. Under these circumstances the quality of the family must deteriorate. Sexual and other crimes would flourish. And children will grow up to be misfits in society, to be able to contribute nothing to the quality of life of the community.

34. It is not possible to dismantle urban slums and to send back the slum-dwellers to their villages. Besides they are needed in the towns because they provide the labour in the modern industries and other businesses.

35. The Government has a responsibility here to provide better housing in-situ or in properly-planned housing estates as close as possible to the place of work. The employers themselves must undertake some of these housing.

36. It will cost money. But it will be money well-spent for it will reduce crimes and other undesirable activities in the community. It will also ensure better health which in turn will save the community much money. In the end it will determine the progress or otherwise of the society and the civilisation that it will build.

37. Between the ambiguity in the definition of the modern family, the enforced exposure to different and largely unacceptable moral values and the needs of modernisation, the family as we know in the past is faced with the possibility of collapse or becoming irrelevant. The question is, do we allow the family as we know it to collapse and become irrelevant or do we try to save the family.

38. As a Muslim I have no difficulty in making a choice. Islam is a way of life. If Muslims have not been able to cope with the problems faced in our way of life, it is not because of the injunctions and teachings of Islam. It is because we have wrongly interpreted Islam or we are in a state of denial, talking about Islam profusely but refusing to recognise that we are living in the 21st century and not the 7th century; we are living in an age where what was impossible in the 7th century is common and possible today. We know for example that Islam prohibits the depiction of the images of man and animals. But we now see portraits of man and beasts daily. It is no longer possible to prohibit photography. But the injunction against having such images is to prevent their being worshipped. We do not worship the images we see.

39. Some would say how dare a person who is not a recognised ulama say anything about wrong interpretations of Islam. The answer is simple. The Prophet brought and taught only one Islam. Today we have more than a thousand religions all claiming to be Islam. Many are so different that the followers of these different Islam claim that those not of their particular interpretations are not Muslims. In fact such is their adherence to their particular interpretation that they are ready to fight and kill those Muslims belonging to other interpretations.

40. Who are the interpreters? Almost invariably they are the learned in Islam. It cannot be that because they are learned therefore they are always right. They cannot all be right if they differ so much from each other to the point of declaring people who differ from them are not Muslims.

41. I cannot say which interpretation is right and which is wrong. But it is impossible for all to be right.

42. There is therefore a need in this challenging times for all the learned ones, together with those who have expertise in the particular field, and in this case, the challenge facing the institution of the family, to come together and to study carefully the situation and to formulate solutions to the problems of the modern day family in accordance with the true teachings of Islam.

43. For this we Muslims must to go back to the fundamentals or basic teachings of Islam as found in the Al-Quran and the verified Hadith, where there should be no different interpretations between the different sects, in order to ensure that the Muslim's way of life for the family is adhered to. There is a need to reject not just the liberal foreign ideas but also the ultra-conservative ideas which are clearly not Islamic.

44. Islam liberated the Jahilliah from their uncivilised ways and helped these same people build a great civilisation. There is evidence that we are slipping back into the culture of the pre-Islamic Jahilliah. We will be destroyed unless we make serious efforts to prevent it. And one of the fields that needs urgent attention is the institution of the family and marriage which had served us so well throughout the history of human civilisation and of Islam. A strong family and respect for the institution of marriage will undoubtedly contribute towards the development of the Muslim ummah and their nations.

Thank you.