

**SPEECH BY TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
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**“Social Cohesion, Intercultural Friendship and Understanding”**

1. Firstly I would like to thank Darul Uloom Academy of Brisbane, the Australian Islamic Friendship Association and the Lebanese Muslim Association for this invitation to speak on Social Cohesion, Intercultural Friendship and Understanding.
2. I do not know whether I am qualified to talk on these subjects since I come from a country where we have not really succeeded in creating Social Cohesion, Intercultural Friendship and Understanding after fifty years of independence.
3. Malaysia as you may know is a truly multiracial country. The difference is not only about ethnicity but the ethnic divide is amplified by the different races professing very different religions, languages and cultures. To make matters worse, there is a great disparity in the distribution of material wealth between the races.
4. All these differences stand in the way of national cohesion, intercultural friendship and understanding. Yet for half a century, Malaysia had remained stable and peaceful except for the race riots in 1969.
5. Perhaps there is after all something to be learnt from Malaysia's management of racial, cultural and religious differences, considering that in many countries, mere differences in religious interpretations between different sects of the same religion are enough to cause violence, fighting and killings.
6. You must forgive me if I talk a lot about Malaysia. This is because I am more familiar with the ethnic and cultural problems in my country. Malaysia is not a shining example of intercultural friendship and understanding, but Malaysia had been dealing with this problem since its independence and even before, and had learnt a lot about intercultural divide.
7. Under British rule, no attempt was made to integrate the peoples of different races in Malaya. Rather, the British allowed the natural tendencies of people of different races to have their own ghettos or enclaves and to remain deeply separated. Probably it was good for the colonialists.
8. It is not surprising that in the period between the Japanese withdrawal and the return of the British, there were serious racial clashes between the indigenous Malays and Chinese. The situation was anarchic and law and order was only restored after the British set up the British Military Administration.

9. The fighting stopped but the dislike and hatred of each other, persisted. There certainly was no love lost between the majority but poorer Malays and the smaller but richer Chinese community.

10. Despite this, the leaders of the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians came together to hammer out a kind of race relations which, despite the animosities between the Malays and the Chinese, successfully brought them together to struggle for independence.

11. Basically, the solution was to agree to share in the administration of the country, roughly according to the proportions of the different races in the population. To improve the strength of the minority races, a million citizenships were given out without the need for the customary tests for citizenship.

12. The formula worked at the top level among the more urbane leadership. There was friendship and understanding between them. But it did not percolate to the lower level. Still, the desire for independence was so strong that the other differences, were ignored.

13. Because of the differences in religion, the Malays being entirely Muslims, the Chinese Buddhists or Taoists and the Indians Hindus, intermarriages were very infrequent. Thus one way of cementing intercultural relations has not been available in Malaysia.

14. Everything points to inevitable clashes between the races and to political instability. But as you may know, Malaysia is stable and peaceful and has developed greatly under an administration which is mainly Malay and an economy which is predominantly Chinese.

15. Still we have not achieved the desired social cohesion, friendship and understanding between the different peoples of Malaysia.

16. Nevertheless, I think Malaysia can provide a good model of a degree of social cohesion, intercultural friendship and understanding between peoples of different races living together in a country.

17. To achieve these objectives the first need is for everyone to recognize and understand the reality of the situation. All must acknowledge the importance of reducing the differences between them, in particular with regard to the distribution of wealth.

18. Wealth distribution between the different races, or cultural groups is very important because even unequal wealth within the same groups can cause serious conflicts.

19. Socialism and communism were born out of the conflicts between the rich and the poor in single ethnic countries and we know how it led to the violent Russian revolution in which millions were killed.

20. But when the imbalance in wealth is associated with racial differences, the situation becomes even more explosive.

21. Consequently, if intercultural relations are to improve, the first thing that has to be done is to reduce wealth disparities between the races. There should be no identification of race with economic function if we want to bring the races closer together.

22. Even before wealth distribution is fair between cultural groups attention has to be given to the sharing of political power.

23. In a country with minorities, the minorities cannot have equal political power with the majority. But attempts must be made to give significant roles in politics to the minorities. Ignoring racial or cultural differences in politics usually does not work.

24. However we are seeing today the possibility of a great change taking place in the United States. For the first time, a candidate from a minority group is vying for the presidency of the country peopled by a very large majority of ethnically different group. But actually the process took a long time, more than a century. During that time, minority group had to fight battles, including violent battles, to be recognised as having the same rights as the majority. It looks as if finally the struggle is going to bear fruit. But actually the task is made less difficult because the candidate is not typical of the minority concerned.

25. This excepted, sharing political roles fairly between the racial or cultural groups is still imperative.

26. With the economic and political power fairly or evenly distributed, then the real task of building intercultural friendship may begin.

27. The peoples of differing cultures must learn about the background, the beliefs and the cultures of each other. Perhaps race studies should be included in the curriculum of schools and universities. This may be able to prevent the stereotyping and demonising of each other.

28. In Malaysia, one of the major obstacles is the right to establish ethnic based schools where the teachings are in the language of the particular races. This prevents the children of different cultural groups from coming in contact with one another during the formative years of their lives. I believe that it is only in Malaysia that we find Government-financed ethnic schools where the medium of instruction is in the language of the Chinese and Indian. The national schools

where the teaching is in the national language have become effectively the schools for the indigenous Malays. As you can imagine, intercultural friendship cannot be achieved in this system.

29. At the university level, the students of different races would find difficulty in developing interracial friendship coming as they do from ethnic based schools. They hardly mix with each other. In such a situation intercultural friendship and understanding is difficult.

30. Later when they graduate, they will find difficulty in adjusting to a society where the different races have to work alongside each other. This is especially so because they would each go back to their own ethnic enclaves.

31. You can imagine how difficult it is for intercultural friendship and understanding to develop in Malaysia. This is especially so at the level of the low income groups.

32. The lesson that can be learnt from Malaysia is that the integration of different races must begin in the schools. It must be systematic, amplified by deliberate teachings and explanations about each others' cultural differences.

33. If all students go to the same schools, it would be easier for all of them to be taught common value. The most important values that must be promoted is tolerance; tolerance of the different cultures and religions of each other.

34. This is becoming more and more important because migrants from different countries are to be found everywhere. It is important that there be tolerance for the migrants and the migrants must be equally tolerant of the indigenous people.

35. Common values must be promoted while the differences should be reduced. The common values can be found in sports and in music. Ethnic foods have been accepted as national food in many countries. In Britain, chicken tikka is as much accepted by the peoples of different groups as their national food, such as steak and potatoes.

36. But there is a need for everyone to be sensitive to the feelings of everyone else. A common practice in Malaysia is for hotels to prepare all kinds of foods for Muslims for the iftar. Often the guests are non-Muslims. But in deference to the Muslims everyone waits for iftar before eating. The non-Muslims are quite comfortable with this. They are sensitive to the feelings of the Muslims during the fast.

37. It is also a practice in Malaysia for peoples of differing faiths to participate in each others' religious festival by holding open houses where all are welcome.

38. But in spite of all these, intercultural friendship is still not common. In the schools and the universities, each cultural group would confine their friendship to

people who are of the same culture as themselves. This, as I have pointed out, is due to having separate schools for each cultural group, but equally important is the size of the cultural groups.

39. Where the minority is small, there would not be much choice except to befriend those of the bigger cultural group. But where the minority is big, the need to befriend those outside the cultural group may not arise.

40. Sometimes of course, there will be deliberate attempts to isolate a small cultural minority from others. This is more common among Muslims. The cultural divide among Muslims and non-Muslims appears to be very wide. Conservative Muslims cannot accept the liberal values and morality of the non-Muslims, in particular the nominal Christian. There has been some tragic consequence when a Muslim girl befriends a non-Muslim.

41. When Muslims choose to live in large non-Muslim communities, they may find it difficult to adjust. This is more cultural than Islamic as Islam teaches tolerance of the peoples of other religions. It does not sanction the kind of family honour which can result in the killing of daughters and sisters. It is not Islamic at all. If Muslims cannot accept having their daughters becoming friendly with non-Muslims, then it is better if they go to live in countries with 100% Muslim population.

42. Fortunately, these are exceptional cases. In Malaysia, conversion to Islam is required by tradition when a non-Muslim marries a Muslim. Unfortunately, when the husband divorces or deserts his Muslim convert wife and the wife is left without sustenance, she is likely to revert to her former religion.

43. Malay Muslims are intolerant of apostates, the more extreme even advocating that they be executed. A lot of racial tension is created by the reversion of Muslim converts to their former religion.

44. Needless to say, such attitudes not only prevent intercultural friendship but virtually discourage conversion to Islam.

45. Intercultural friendship and understanding is much more needed today because people are more mobile and tend to migrate to other countries where the cultural composition is not like in their countries of origin. There is therefore a greater need for everyone to learn and understand the differing cultures, in particular those related to religion of other members of the population of their new countries.

46. For Muslims, this is doubly important because more and more Muslims are now living in non-Muslim countries where the cultures are contrary to the cultures they are used to. Without losing their faiths in their religion, they must

make adjustments within what is prescribed by Islam. I believe that Islam is not so rigid as to stand in the way of such adjustments.

47. In this, there is a need for Muslims to revert to the one religion of Islam that was brought by the Prophet Mohamad s.a.w. The guidance must be found in the Quran and the truly verified Hadiths.

48. In the 1400 years of Islam, there have been very many learned men who had interpreted Islam according to their own understanding and the conditions under which they lived. Unfortunately, some of their interpretations are so different from others that they have divided the Muslims according to the imams they follow or the sects they belong to. So extreme may be the differences that they may believe that they are the only true Muslims and that others are not. Often this has led to violence and endless killing of each other. Obviously, one or the other of the interpretation is wrong. But which one?

49. For this reason we must not allow the teachings of a particular imam to divide us. This has become more important now because we are seeing more Muslims being killed by Muslims because of the differences in their belief as compared to Muslims being killed by non-Muslims.

50. Instead, we should revert to the Quran and find out how we should live in friendship with the followers of other religions. We should remember Surah Al Kafirun – to you your religion, and to me, mine. There is not a word in the Quran which enjoins us to kill non-Muslims, except when they attack Muslims.

51. If we abide by this injunction then we will see social cohesion, intercultural friendship and understanding wherever we may be. And others too will befriend and understand us.

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