

**SPEECH BY TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
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“The Call for Unity”

1. Firstly I would like to thank the Ramadhan Foundation for holding the 2nd International Muslim Unity Conference in Kuala Lumpur together with Perdana Leadership Foundation of Malaysia. Thank you also for this opportunity for me to speak on this crucial subject in front of this distinguished gathering of Muslim scholars.
2. We are here today to discuss about a very elusive thing – namely Muslim Unity.
3. Unity is of course something that everyone wants to achieve principally because it spells strength, less conflicts and more stability. Being free of conflicts i.e. being stable and at peace is the desire of everyone. And when there is unity this state of being stable and peaceful is much more likely to prevail. The benefit of unity is therefore immeasurable.
4. Unity also implies mutual reinforcement i.e. it combines the strength of the individuals to give greater strength to each and everyone in the group and the group itself. And greater strength means greater safety, greater security.
5. For Muslims, being brothers is what is enjoined by Islam. And that means closeness and mutuality of support for each other. Muslim as brothers are each others’ keepers. The brotherhood of Islam implies mutual responsibility in ensuring the well-being of all Muslims.
6. Right from the beginning Muslims have been exhorted to regard each other as brothers. They are to be mutually responsible and protective of each other. And when they do this in unity their capability to protect each other and the community i.e. the ummah will be stronger.
7. The Islamic exhortation to regard each other as brothers is therefore in order to give them strength to defend themselves and Islam. This was very important especially in the early days when their numbers were small and they were surrounded by their enemies. The need for unity at that time was very strong and it did not need much exhortation for them to stay together.
8. That unity gives strength is often a motto or a slogan for many countries. And indeed there is strength in numbers when they act together as one unit.

9. The early Muslims did treat each other as brothers. This was exemplified by the companions of the Prophet who stood together through all their trials and tribulations. It was this brotherhood which led to the success of Muslims in spreading the faith and in defending the faithful.

10. Unfortunately after the demise of the Prophet cracks began to appear in the ranks of the Muslims. The conflict between Saidina Ali and Muawiyah led to the deepest split which is manifested by the emergence of the two major Islamic sects – the Sunni and the Shiites. Since then there have been more divisions within the ummah due largely to the differences in the interpretations of the teachings of Islam by different learned imams or ulamas.

11. Today the Muslims are deeply divided into many different sects, which often are violently pitted against each other. Through the centuries there have been hostilities between them with assassinations and wars. Today the lethal suicidal bombers of different sects direct their attacks against each other, killing hundreds of Muslims each time. They may believe they would become martyrs and be lodged in heaven. But can we really believe they would when they are going against the injunctions that Muslims must not kill Muslims.

12. It is said that their targets are the foreign enemies which had invaded their countries. But it cannot be denied that most of those killed in the suicide bombing attacks are Muslims. Revenge and retaliation seem to be the main motive. After a Shiite attack on Sunnis the latter would seek to avenge the killings of their people by attacking the Shiites with the same ferocity. Then the Shiites would retaliate in the same way. This would be followed by Sunni attacks. It seems that there would be no end to the Muslims killing Muslims. It is as if the age of the Jahiliah has returned.

13. It is the same in Pakistan. There are no foreign enemies involved in these attacks, only Pakistani Muslims against Pakistani Muslims. Whether it be religious differences or political differences, Muslims readily kill each other to express their anger and opposition.

14. The saddest part is that nowhere have these killings resulted in solving the conflicts or victory for anyone. No objectives have been achieved. No one wins and no one has been so defeated as to submit to the other side and to sue for peace.

15. The feuds and the killings would just go on and on. The Muslim country concerned would be unstable and incapable of development or progress. The country would be backward and poor. And being backward and poor they often fall prey to the predators around them.

16. In some Muslim countries the division is caused by tribal loyalties. All are Muslims and all belong to the same race or ethnic group. Even the language and

culture are the same. But such is the enmity between the tribes that the fighting between them never ends. Their country becomes totally unstable and dangerous to the locals and foreigners alike. As a result nobody invests to create wealth and jobs. The country remained poor and undeveloped. We can conclude that the country has failed.

17. Weakened by their divisions and their instability, the Muslim countries become easy prey to foreign predators – especially the Europeans. They lend themselves to easy manipulation by the European imperialists in the past and the European powers of today. It is not unusual for Muslim countries to allow themselves to be used for fighting other Muslim countries. Indeed even the Jews are able to make use of the antagonism between Muslim countries, so as to pit them against each other and so weaken resistance to Jewish hegemony.

18. It is clear that the divisions within the Muslim ummah is not doing them any good at all. Besides these divisions are not in conformity with the teachings of Islam – that all Muslims are brothers. Certainly the fighting and killings of Muslims by Muslims is against the injunction of the Quran.

19. If we are true practicing Muslims we must restore the brotherhood of the Muslims. It does not matter which come first whether brotherhood or unity. What is important is for the Muslims to reduce if not eliminate the divisions between them and to try and achieve unity.

20. We must appreciate that this will not be an easy task. We had in the past talked a lot about Muslim unity and brotherhood. Many have preached unity. But obviously it has eluded us.

21. Perhaps the first tangible step towards unity was the founding of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. It was to be a kind of Commonwealth of Nations but it would be confined to Muslim states.

22. After extended negotiations the Organisation was finally set up. But then we had no real definition of Muslim countries. Today many of the countries that are members of OIC were not really Muslim countries. Even the representatives attending the conference may not be Muslims.

23. But still we should not exclude the countries where a substantial percentage of the population is made up of Muslims.

24. The OIC is a reality in terms of its organisation. But it has not resulted in Muslim unity. In fact it often serves to emphasise the division within the Muslim world. The disagreements between the member countries are so obvious as to expose their disunity.

25. The OIC works on a basis of consensus. Every member must agree before any decision can be made. It is impossible for everyone to agree in any group of people. In fact a consensus is equivalent to giving veto power to every single member. This is not conducive to organisational decision making.

26. One of the problems of the OIC is that it is an organisation of Governments of countries. Governments have numerous constraints. They are not really free to make decisions. It is the interest of their countries that take precedent. It is not religion, or the similarity of religion which gets priority. Ties with other Governments and groupings also influence the actions and decisions of Governments. And these ties are often against Muslim unity.

27. What is clear is that as an Organisation of Governments the OIC is unable to consider anything purely on the basis of religious injunctions or the interest of religion. Even the injunction of Islam that all Muslims are brothers cannot override certain other national priorities. OIC has therefore failed to bring about unity among Muslims.

28. If Governments cannot do this then who can? In today's world we are seeing more and more civil action i.e. action by the people when their Governments have apparently failed them. The NGOs are post-war phenomena. Though they are without authority or power – they have found ways to get their views across and eventually to force Governments to act on the matters brought up by them.

29. One of the most successful NGOs is that concerned with environmental pollution. Governments had apparently ignored the affect of pollution by industries and motor vehicles on the environment and the effect of this on the health of people.

30. Through a variety of campaigns to create awareness among the people; through scientific research and in some instances through mass demonstrations the NGO's have been able to force the Governments to become aware of the pollution that was taking place and to take action.

31. The anti-pollution NGO movement grew as more people came to realise the validity and the importance of their struggle. Today every country has some environmental NGO organisations so that there was no way for the people and the Governments of the world to ignore the importance of maintaining the environment pollution free. There are now Green Parties which are represented in the Parliaments to ensure that the environment receives the attention of Governments. As a result of the agitations by the environmental NGOs, the concern for the environment has become such that Governments which ignore the problem may be overthrown.

32. There are many other NGOs which have been successful. Human Rights, Climate Change, the campaign by NGOs against whaling have all affected the thinking of the world community and on Governments. Some Governments and countries have actually taken up the issues identified by the NGOs.

33. If Muslim Governments cannot bring about Muslim unity, and individual efforts appear too small to have any worthwhile effect, can we Muslims who are concerned about unity resort to civic action, to the formation of NGOs in order to achieve our goal.

34. I think it is something that we must look at seriously. If we can have a chain of NGOs in all the Muslim countries and wherever there are Muslims in substantial numbers, it may be possible for us to promote unity at first among the Muslim NGOs. We should not be too ambitious as to set our target too high i.e. the unity of Muslims worldwide. A mere unity of Muslim NGOs would be sufficient at least as beginning.

35. If we decide to make the NGO as the vehicle for Muslim unity, we must determine what are the objectives and purpose as early as possible. This is because we need to avoid objectives which will not win the support of the majority of the Muslims, which will be divisive.

36. I think our first priority should be merely the promotion of Muslim brotherhood as enjoined by the Quran. There may be question as to which Muslims should unite. The answer should be all who claim that they are Muslims. We should not question to which Muslim sects they belong, whether they are Sunnis or Shiite or Wahabis or whatever, before we consider them qualified to join other Muslims in brotherhood and unity.

37. But having said that we must still qualify according to whether they accept the basic Muslim article of faiths i.e. that they bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger. Obviously those who worship other gods or claim that they are followers of a new Prophet or followers of alleged Imam Mahadi cannot be accepted as Muslims whom we must regard as our brothers.

38. We should stress not the differences between the sects but rather the common things that they believe in or practice. We should not try to convert each other but we should try to know each other better.

39. There are many misunderstandings between us. We suspect each other of practicing things which are incompatible with Islam. We are very suspicious of each other. We should try to clarify where there are misunderstandings and remove suspicions of each other. But we must not give the impression that we are trying to change the belief or practices of each other. If we try to do this, immediately there would be conflict rather than unity.

40. We must remember that we claim there are in the world 1.6 billion Muslims. If we discount those not of our sect; if we regard those of other sects as being non-Muslims or not quite Muslim, then we cannot claim that there 1.6 billion Muslims in the world.

41. The size of the faithful is important. It has an impact on the perception of Islam and the Muslims by the rest of the world. Even without unity of the ummah, the size gives us strength. We must therefore never allow our differences of interpretations of Islam to exclude big segments of the ummah.

42. The work of unifying the ummah will take time. We cannot wait until all the Muslims are united before we try to benefit from unity. We must make even limited unity at the NGO level work in our favour, in favour of our religion.

43. We know that for a very long period the Muslim civilisation was the foremost civilisation in the world. Today we cannot claim that our civilisation is as great as before. We have been sidelined and relegated to the rear as compared to other current civilisation. There is not a single one of the Muslim countries which are considered as developed. We are third world countries even though we may be very, very rich.

44. This is so because money alone is not the criteria. To be developed we must be at the forefront in terms of our administrative capability, in our mastery of modern knowledge and technology, in our commercial and industrial capacity. Of course we must have the defensive capacity commensurate with our size and wealth.

45. The unity at NGO level cannot achieve or acquire all these simultaneously. We have to set priorities. Foremost should be the acquisition of knowledge, for knowledge is the key to our progress to being developed, to the resuscitation of the civilisation.

46. The Muslim NGOs must agitate for Muslim Governments to have better education systems. While we must not neglect the study of religion, neither must we neglect the study of the so-called secular subjects such as mathematics and the sciences.

47. If we care to examine carefully we will find that these subjects are not secular as they are alleged to be. They are in fact necessary for the well-being and security of the ummah and of Islam itself. It is because we chose to neglect science and mathematics that today we are incapable of inventing and producing the sophisticated weapons to meet our defence needs for example.

48. Yet Islam enjoins upon us to provide for the defence of the ummah. In the early days we did this by having war steeds, swords, bows and arrows, catapults

etc. Those weapons were effective in those days. Now we need modern sophisticated weapons. Because we lack the scientific and mathematical knowledge and the capacity to produce our own weapons we have to depend on others. And most certainly what we procure from others would not be adequate for our defence.

49. These other knowledge are therefore not secular at all. They will help as to defend our religion and the ummah. We must therefore enhance the study of these subjects and acquire the same level of knowledge as the people in the developed countries.

50. The NGOs for unity must therefore carry out a sustained campaign for the proper education of the Muslims as a part of the obligation of Muslims.

51. Again we have to admit that to properly educate the Muslims would take a long time. In the meantime we are seeing the oppression of Muslims everywhere. Their countries are being invaded, their people are being imprisoned and tortured, and hundreds of thousands are being killed in unequal wars.

52. Muslims are very angry. And in anger they lash out at everyone, including at other Muslims. They blow themselves up in revenge, killing at random, not so much their enemies as they do their own people.

53. At the end of it all, after they have lost their lives, what have they gained? Basically nothing that would stop their enemies from continuing to oppress and kill them. In fact they invite retaliation, which in many cases are more severe than the damage they had caused to their enemies.

54. The Muslim NGOs must launch a concerted campaign to stop the revenge mentality which leads to blind retaliation. The Muslims must work out strategies with the objective of achieving success in their struggle to liberate themselves from foreign oppressions of all kinds. The Muslims must be forced to think and plan, to strategise so that their sacrifices if needed would yield the desired results.

55. Obviously the NGOs must urge for Muslim unity in the interest of defending the ummah. But if we fail to achieve total unity we should be prepared to accept even partial unity. There is really much that can be done even with partial unity, if only we apply our minds to the problems.

56. There is no way for the Muslim countries to resort to a war of liberation at the moment or even in the foreseeable future. But there are other means of making Muslim resistance felt by their detractors. They should work out a plan to use whatever assets they have together in order frustrate the enemy. The

results will not be spectacular. But then have we achieved any result, spectacular or otherwise, with our blind acts of revenge in the last 60 years.

57. If we plan carefully, even if there is no unity of Muslim Governments, no real unity of the ummah, we will find that the setting up of unity NGOs in all the Muslim countries and in Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries, and we focus on the limited field that has been mentioned above, namely bringing the Muslims of different sects together, reducing the misunderstanding and suspicions between them, raising the knowledge and skills of the Muslim countries, increasing the wealth and capacities of the Muslims in technology and industry and finally working out a strategy that is within the competence of the Muslim countries, the unity of the NGOs can positively contribute towards the well-being of the Muslims and in time towards Muslim unity.

58. We hesitate to do this, to adopt any strategy for Muslim unity because it cannot be brought about overnight. It would take a considerable length of time. We who initiate the unity of NGOs' movement may never see this unity of the Muslims that we crave for.

59. But this should not deter us. Even the Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w. did not live to see Islam spread throughout the world; to see the greatness of the Islamic civilisation and the great contribution that Islam has made to the human race. Who are we who are not prophets to wish for immediate success for our effort to unify the Muslims and made Muslim brotherhood a reality again.

60. This is going to be a long struggle, taking decades or even centuries. But all struggles must have a beginning. We must initiate the beginning.

61. Insha'allah, there will be others who will take up the struggle. There will be others who will bring success to the struggle for Muslim unity.

62. With this fervent hope, I now open this conference on Muslim unity.

63. May Allah s.w.t bless us our efforts and endow us with success.
