

PM's Keynote Address

International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies

Saturday January 30th 2010 – 8:30 pm.

1. We in Malaysia warmly welcome this gathering of outstanding thinkers from the Southeast Asian region and from around the world. We are pleased at the serious attention devoted here at IAIS and University Malaya's Law Faculty to the important relation between religious values and public policy. Harmoniously relating religion with the legal and court system and with proper functions of the state is necessary to craft the path leading to social harmony and national fulfillment. To the co-sponsoring universities – Brigham Young University in the United States, Universiti Degli Studi of Milan, Italy and Amity University in India – and to all the distinguished international scholars, we wish you well in your deliberations. Your combined efforts and insights will enrich our resources with thoughtful purpose, as they should throughout Southeast Asia.

2. Today we are facing many new and challenging situations, even while confronting deep underlying issues we have tended to shy away from in the past. Partly these issues stem from the burden of history, and in part they arise out of narrow interpretations of religion, and from the limitations of outdated conceptions or conduct of policies which require

re-thinking in light of contemporary realities. These challenges demand wise and creative responses from society leaders and government authorities. I draw attention at this juncture to **four** of the most problematic challenges now facing our region:

3. • Governments must ride the ongoing sweep of Globalization linking our world together ever more tightly. But they need to better exploit its dynamics by drawing differing cultures and religions into cooperative alliances. We know that the dominant political and financial globalizing forces integrate the world–system more closely. But we have also learnt that globalization has the adverse effect of provoking divides and sustaining splits within national polities. Such divisions often reflect deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions.

4. The nations of our region have transcended the political hegemony of colonialism and embraced the economic and developmental benefits of the global market. They should be wary of sacrificing hard won national unity and common purpose for temporary advantages mainly benefiting the partisan interests of a particular class or group in society – whether these be a minority or the majority. Out of diversity came greater richness and strength when we united together for national goals of independence, cultural autonomy and economic advance. To enhance the contribution of national culture and religious identity to global

development, we need to understand ourselves with greater awareness of the cultural values shaping our aspirations and motivating our actions.

5. • Secondly: group identity, diverse cultural factors and race relations are realities of our societies that can provide strength and cohesion for our common life. However, these are also linked to social tensions and divisions that may exploit religious language and symbolism. Is this a proper **use** of the authority and timeless attraction of religion? Or does it represent an **abuse** of religious attachment for narrow group interests? Muslims understand that **compassion** (*rahmah*) and **justice** are the foundations of service and devotion to the All-Merciful (*al-Rahmān*). Without this spirit of compassion animating State policies, the implementation of law, and administration of justice — then social relations can worsen by mechanical application of literal interpretations. The *spirit and ethics of the Law* has to become the chief concern.

6. We can benefit from the **maqāsid** or goal-oriented understanding of Islam – I mean profoundly-informed interpretations seeking **higher objectives** and deeper benefits of legal injunctions, and which understand particular provisions of our religion in the light of higher goals and ends. Actualizing genuine benefit for humans is Islam’s single overriding reason-for-being, and this must inform our understanding and interpretation of its laws. The State is thereby challenged to translate the essence of compassion and beneficence into effective policy initiatives,

wise judicial decisions, intelligent fatwas and relevant interpretations of Shari'ah that solve pressing issues and contribute to the common good.

7. • Good governance must meet the challenge of guiding and leading citizens to align their personal interest with the wider purpose of ensuring social harmony, political stability, and economic development. This is what is being sought in the '**1 MALAYSIA**' project we initiated in our effort to consolidate bonds of unity among our people, while at the same time celebrating their diverse cultures and lifestyles. '**1 Malaysia**' is a pragmatic reminder of the essential unity and brotherhood of people that must supersede narrower group interests. Cooperation and convergence is to be preferred over competition and clash, both for nation building and in international relations between states.

8. Perhaps we are approaching an era when officials and policy makers in our part of the globe begin thinking in terms of **1 ASIA**. This might bring us closer to a truly global mind-set: One Humanity upon One Earth. Need I remind you how this great ideal resonates with Islam's most essential doctrine of *tawhid* /'Oneness' which teaches the reality of One Creator: that if truly One God exists then there is essentially one humanity. Diversity within unity is an outlook and a hope we need to nurture for the sake of our children and our planet.

9. • Fourth, we do not shrink from posing the question that is the greatest challenge facing us. Are the institutions of government, the representatives of judicial instruments and courts, and leading religious authorities capable of thinking and acting in pursuit of **collective welfare and interest**? Here, we are convinced that the heart of religion retains the potential to exercise a moral compass and spiritual guidance – provided the living touchstone of religion’s ethical and spiritual energy is awakened. Our religion informs us of the value of moral education for social responsibility in life, reinforcing the ideals of personal integrity, service to our fellows and to society, and cultivating global ecological and ethical awareness.

10. Distinguished professors and world thinkers – I firmly believe that such ethical and spiritual awakening is only possible when human mind and heart join forces to comprehend age-old questions of existence: our purpose, our ultimate meaning, our responsibilities to ourselves and to our fellows. The blind faith of ignorant devotion cannot penetrate the depths of the human equation. Rather, enlightened and self-critical patterns of thought may guide us to uncover the higher human objectives resident in religious Law and possible for State governance.

11. Rebuilding the world for the 21st century requires that many countries build or rebuild their Higher Education. This is not simply a matter of importing ideas or technical specialists, but of creatively

developing the life of people at all levels – physical, social and spiritual. Unfortunately in our highly rationalist modern context, education in the various physical and social sciences generally trains young scholars to abstract from their cultures. We need to train some scholars in each discipline with the bibliographical and methodological tools that relate the work of a university, the government or non-governmental organizations to their own cultural resources—so they may incorporate their cultural and religious heritage into their work.

12. Accountability under the rule of law and Constitutional checks and balances present challenges for emerging democracies in this region, as well as in our own pluralist environment here in Malaysia. We are convinced that a sound commitment to these principles inspires public confidence and binds people together behind common national objectives. Malaysia prides itself for its track record of having had **thirteen** national elections free of distortion and manipulation – this is a record for the entire Muslim world! Our constitution commits us to a set of common objectives, and its mandates on basic rights and liberties are predicated on objectivity and the equality of all citizens. But this promise is an evolving reality that must constantly be nourished and guarded, and whose roots have to be watered regularly for it to grow into a well-established Tree.

13. To build cooperation and harmony among the peoples within nations and between the nations, we should strive to enable the new global culture to become more inclusive of multiple identities. It must learn to appreciate diversity – rather than force assimilation under one dominant value system. This requires assisting nations in their process of modernization and globalization in ways that enrich rather than impoverish their proper identity and cultural authenticity, and thereby enrich humanity as a whole. This cannot be imposed through military or economic domination. Scientific modernity must not move us away from ethical norms of service to humanity. The humanizing of technology, a proper ethical vision of economics, and a transformed civil society all have to be energised by this **human-centric** outlook.

14. Reason articulates **Faith**, allowing religion to realize the potential to retrieve a people's foundational values and apply them in building democratic societies upholding justice and prosperity. It is true that religion may function both as a catalyst and as an impediment to social change and national cohesion. Our task is to harness the tremendous force residing at the heart of religion in order to advance social and national unity. One sign of our times is that religious and spiritual values take on renewed importance for human fulfillment. This is most relevant for stability and peace in fostering new openness between religions at the roots of the great civilizations. When governments ignore or marginalize religious values and concerns, they lose an essential

ingredient of social capital. This loss leads to poor governance and societal insecurity.

15. Respected scholars and guests, ladies and gentlemen, friends: Your deliberations here at IAIS may provide governments with fresh **insights** in crafting policy alive to benefitting human needs and requirements. We look forward to reviewing the results of your discussions. I assure you that my administration will pay attention to the work you are doing here. Deeds speak louder than words, and the measure of success will always be how well we translate ideas and intent into practice and habit. With this – ***Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*** – I hereby declare this important Conference open and commend you for your efforts.

Thank You, etc. . . .

