



OPENING REMARKS

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SEMINAR

ON

***“PERSPECTIVES ON ISLAM AND THE WEST: THE
NEED FOR A MODERATE OUTLOOK”***

BY

UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

16 JUNE 2011

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh,

Good Morning, and

Salam Satu Malaysia.

1. May I at the outset welcome everyone to the Seminar *“Perspectives on Islam and the West: the Need for a Moderate Outlook”* which is hosted by the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya.

2. It is indeed a great honour to be given the privilege to set in motion this significant seminar which will address an important challenge confronting the international community today and need to be addressed collectively and urgently.

3. The history of political struggle by Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Ali Izetbegovi to name but a few has taught us that compassion and goodwill would eventually triumph over violence and injustice. As the Commander-in-Chief of the Bosnian Army, Ali Izetbegovi constantly forbades war crimes and he forbades seeking revenge.

4. Going into Islamic history, Salah al-Din or better known as Saladin even gained the respect of his adversary Richard the Lionheart during the Crusades. After the capture of Jerusalem, it is said that Saladin turned down the request of his soldiers to pray in the Church for fear it will be converted into a mosque.

5. The exemplary conduct of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), was one of moderation, as after years of persecution and harassment by the pagan Quraish, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) entered Mecca with compassion, dignity and forgiveness.

6. In the struggle of those great men, one commonality abounds, *“moderation”*.

7. Moderation is thus a real living principle and not alien to mankind. It is not theoretical in the words of Prime Minister DatoqSri Najib Tun Razak.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

8. Many among us today would know Islam literally means *Peace* and that in Islam, we advocate peace, where “*assalamualaikum*” means *peace be upon you* while one of Allah’s 99 names in the Al-Quran is “*Al Salam*” which means *Peace*. Therefore, it is a distortion of a faith of peace if a Muslim is to use Islam to justify his declaration of an Armageddon against all non-Muslims and the West.

9. Moreover, Islam was sent as mercy to humanity and not as an ideology of terror or hatred. On the contrary, Islam advocates plurality and moral equality of all faiths. Even the Quran tells Muslims to respect other religions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. As we are all too aware, since September 11, the rise of Islamophobia perpetrated by extremists among Muslims as well as terrorists that claim to do in the name of *jihad*, as well as ignorance and bigotry, is cause of grave concern. This, however, has also fueled numerous initiatives to defuse the heightened tension and propagate understanding between Islam and the West.

11. This Seminar which is a commendable effort is one of the many ongoing initiatives including to name a few *the Cordoba Initiative*, *the ASEM Inter-faith Dialogue*, *the Asia-Pacific Regional Inter-faith Dialogue*, etc. to address the schism between the West and Islam.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. At the diplomatic level, Malaysia too has initiated several of these efforts and played an active role in promoting inter-civilisational dialogue, specifically between Islam and the West.

13. Recognising that inter-civilisational conflict has a great impact at the diplomatic and political level and that a lot can be done to overcome this at this level rather than at the philosophical or theological plane, Malaysia has endeavoured to contribute regularly to these dialogue efforts, particularly at the international level.

14. It is thus with this goal in mind that the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), the Training and Research wing of Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been tasked to engage in this and future such Seminars as they impact upon the business of diplomacy and managing peaceful relations between nations. Since diplomacy includes building bridges between people, cultures and civilizations, the present effort to bridge the gap between Islam and the West is thus a logical extension of this function through the exercise of dialogue as a means towards the promotion of international peace and security. Cultural diplomacy would be one of the tools towards this direction.

15. Towards this end, Prime Minister Dato Sri Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak took the world by storm when he called for the *'Global Movement of the Moderates'* at the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2010. The speech was well received by the International Community.

16. Amongst others, Dato Sri called on *'moderates of all countries, of all religions to take back the centre, to reclaim the agenda for peace and pragmatism, and to marginalise the extremisms'*. This *'Global Movements of Moderates'* is an opportunity, according to PM, *'to provide the much needed leadership to bring hope and restore dignity for all. With greater will and collective determination, we will build a more peaceful, secure and equitable world'*.

17. It is not an easy task, but there is a need towards building a sustainable momentum and promoting the Movement, to engage like-minded *'moderate'* people, groups, academicians, think tanks, political parties and governments from across the globe inclusive of developed and developing nations to come on board and materialized the Movement. I believe would include everyone here, could initiate the move to develop the frameworks, strategies and action plans for the furtherance of the Movement. Precisely, for this very reason, your presence here is no coincidence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

18. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and other religious affiliation are freely practiced in Malaysia - that make us the unique plural society which is an asset and strength premised upon a long history of tolerance and co-existence. Tolerance and respect is shown by making our religious and cultural celebrations as national holidays and celebrating them as national events.

19. The sensitivity to others' culture is also evident in Malaysia as well as the respect we have for each others' religious institutions and places of worship. Foreigners to Malaysia are always intrigued by the number of mosques, churches, Indian *kuils* and Chinese temples they see abound all around the country.

20. Such co-existence with other religions together with Islam as the official religion in Malaysia is a measure of what we mean by a Global Movement of Moderates thus ensuring multicultural and religious harmony. This will lead to moderation or "*wasatiyyah*" in the Islamic tradition of mutual justice. While Samuel Huntington spoke of the "*Clash of Civilisation*", instead Malaysia can proudly say we have "*Celebration of Civilisation*".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

21. It is also indeed unfortunate that the ongoing Israel-Palestinian conflicts have been cast as a religious war adding fuel to the misperception of Islam. This is how Israel would like it to be perceived to pitch the West against Islam. It is also not a religious war between Jews and Muslim but a territorial war between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

22. I would like to raise two issues here. We have been banditting around with the word "*extremists*" and "*moderates*", however, how can we justify, how extreme is an extremist and how moderate can someone be before crossing over to the extreme side? What is the yardstick to be used to rule out the two terms? There is a need to have greater understanding on the two terminologies and in his many statements,

Prime Minister, Datoq Sri Najib has not confined the idea along religious nor political lines. However, the question here would be . should we even try to define *moderates* and *extremists*? Should we formalize the two terms in order to ensure the world is on the same par when we are discussing the term *extremists* and *moderates*? One man's meat is another man's poison. This seminar is a good breaking ground to further discuss on these two concepts.

23. The issues on the West and Islam are indeed complex, perplexing and multifaceted. It transcends many dimensions, elements and boundaries, be it political, cultural, religious and even economic. Even issues such migrations and human rights are not spared. The challenge at this critical juncture of human history in this age of borderless world is to promote greater understanding, cooperation and tolerance as the guiding principle to ensure a world that is at peace with itself. Simplistic as it may sound, there-in lies the future of West-Islam relations at the national and global level.

24. I would like to end with a quote from Edmund Burke that *All that is necessary for the Triumph of Evil is for all Good Man to do Nothing*.

With this, I wish the *Seminar on Perspectives on Islam and the West: the Need for a Moderate Outlook* a success.

Thank you.

Wassalamualaikum, warahmatulahi wabarakatuh.