

SIGNIFICANT SPEECHES, EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

High-Level Closed-Door Dialogue on Religion and Human Rights in the New Malaysia (Pulse Grande Hotel, Putrajaya, 15 October 2018)

*Speech by YB Dato' Dr Mujahid Yusof Rawa
Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Religious Affairs*

Mr Stefan Priesner, UN Resident Coordinator for Malaysia and UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. On behalf of the Government of Malaysia, I wish to thank the United Nations Country Team in Malaysia for organising this 'High-Level Closed-Door Dialogue on Religion and Human Rights in the New Malaysia'.
2. This dialogue is important and timely given the new political landscape of the country following the recent general election which has led to the establishment of a new government for the first time ever in the country's history. The new government is paving the way for changes that are needed to steer this nation onto the right course – a course that will not only rectify the financial situation of the country but also to bring about sustainable development that focuses on economic growth as well as social justice. Even before coming into power, we realise that economic prosperity alone, without giving priority to the social dimension of development, will not serve in the best interest of the people. The Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) therefore, provide an excellent action plan for development that balances the economic with the social and environmental pillars of development. And we will mainstream the SDGs in

our development planning and implementation across ministries and at the national and subnational levels.

3. In light of this, and in line with the desire to ensure liberty, justice, moderation, peace and harmony, the new government is committed to enhancing Malaysia's human rights records, as expressly highlighted in the Pakatan Harapan Manifesto. The new government recognises that respect for human rights is needed to achieve better living standards and greater quality of life for the Malaysian population. Such commitment is not only consistent the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, particularly Part 2 on Fundamental Liberties, but also in keeping with the call by the international community.
4. Nonetheless, you will agree that in fulfilling these human rights commitments, there lie huge challenges. In the context of Malaysia, championing the human rights agenda can be a very delicate undertaking especially given the diverse nature of our population. Malaysia's multi-racial and multi-religious social fabric lends support to different perceptions and notions about human rights. For instance, certain quarters take the view that human rights should be a primary consideration for all law and policy making, and should be championed at any expense, while others are sceptical about the human rights agenda, citing that it is a Western construct that could become a threat to our beliefs and values.
5. Like in many other countries around the world, religion is an important, if not the most important aspect of most people's lives in Malaysia. For Muslims, Islam is deemed '*ad-din*' or the way of life, and forms the basis of almost all our actions and decisions. The primacy of religion for Muslims is a consideration that needs to be factored in discussions like these. However, Malaysia is home not only to Muslims but to peoples of various religions and faiths and even atheists. While the Federal Constitution stipulates that 'Islam is the religion of the Federation', the very same Article of the Constitution, which is Article 3(1) states that 'other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation'. The Pakatan Harapan Government is committed to upholding this provision of the Constitution in its entirety.
6. Having underscored the role of religion in Malaysian society, and to meet the objectives of today's dialogue, we must first acknowledge the existing friction within the religion and human rights discourse. The controversy

around the perceived incompatibility between human rights and religion, particularly Islam, has been the focus of public debate especially in recent months. These debates, that also take place on social media, if not carried in a constructive manner could be detrimental to our society given the divisive nature of their outcomes. Hence, I welcome very much today's event organised by the United Nations Country Team, with the objective of identifying effective and practical recommendations to address the issue.

7. I believe that in attempting to reconcile the seeming conflict between human rights and religion or human rights and Islam, we must concentrate on the common denominator of both sides. To my mind, it is clear that both religion and human rights have a common goal of upholding human dignity, which is a prerequisite for a meaningful life of meaning. The dignity of the human person is central to all religions and is the premise upon which all human rights are conceived. Upholding human rights, which also promotes respect for diversity is intimately linked to peaceful societies. This is especially true in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population where human rights can serve as a bridge between the different belief systems. We must therefore build on this underlying principle and convince all quarters that religion and human rights are essentially consistent with each other.
8. Of course, there are areas of human rights that may appear to be in conflict with Islamic teachings, but these issues need to be examined constructively within certain contexts. In any case, the principles of non-discrimination and respect for human dignity must be upheld at all times. Islam for one is a religion that emphasises compassion and justice, both of which are elements that complement the principles of human rights. Religious leaders and figures should therefore focus and amplify on these instead of fuelling heated debates that only seek to give a negative impression on human rights and incite division within the society, sometimes for political reasons.
9. As the Minister in-charge of religious affairs, I am in the process of undertaking some reforms especially in mending the negative perceptions towards the religious departments. Religious departments have a significant role in shaping how Islam is promoted among the Muslim community. Therefore, it is crucial that the religious departments dedicate their energy and resources to matters that are in the best interest of Muslims at large and the Malaysian population as a whole. The religious departments should not be focussing on petty issues but should approach matters from a *Maqasid al-Shariah* perspective.

10. Since taking office, I have been advocating for the promotion of Islam through the approaches of *Rahmatan lil Alamin* and *Maqasid al-Shariah*. I have received some degree of criticism from certain religious groups for taking a slightly different path in promoting Islam. This notwithstanding, I stand firm that in the New Malaysia, there are times when we need to depart from convention in order to get things done the right way. The concept of *Rahmatan lil Alamin* stresses the importance of promoting justice for all, including for those of other faiths, through engagement and interaction with all stakeholders. In my view, this approach is necessary in the context of Malaysia given the diverse nature of its population. We must not allow the promotion of Islam to lead to injustices to people of other faiths. This is the core principle of *Rahmatan lil Alamin*.
11. *Maqasid al-Shariah* which views the application of shariah from the perspective of achieving the broader objective of shariah and not from a rather miniscule point of view is also something that the current government is promoting. The overall objective of the shariah which is to promote well-being of the society should always become the basis of the implementation of shariah laws.
12. The principles of *Rahmatan lil Alamin* and *Maqasid al-Shariah* are complementary and mutually reinforcing. And through these approaches, I believe we can foster a Malaysian society of various faiths that live in harmony and unity in line with vision of Malaysia's founding fathers. Having said this, I must emphasise that these strategies will be even more effective with a review of our religious education system that are premised on these principles. Only through quality education will we be able to mould a moderate society that can live together in peace and with respect.
13. In addition, efforts by all stakeholders must be intensified to promote greater understanding of human rights. A lot of the controversies are due to misconceptions and false impressions about human rights principles. It is therefore our shared responsibility – the responsibility of all stakeholders including the government, religious leaders and scholars, civil society and academicians – to make an effort towards achieving these goals. There needs to be more dialogues of this nature so that there is a better understanding among all segments of the Malaysian society on this important topic.

Thank you.