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Malaysia, OIC can set the pace for reform

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COLUMNS

Richard Stengel the managing editor of *Time Magazine*, in a recent editorial, 'One thing we need to do' describes the need for national dialogue on democracy within America in the post Sept 11 era. He writes about how most Americans didn't care much about foreign policy ... and didn't know the name of the prime minister of Malaysia before.

It didn't matter then but it does now. Here is why Stengel is right. And here is why we need to have this conversation not just within the US but also in the United Nations, internationally and within Muslim countries.

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NEWS

Malaysia is the US' 10th largest trading partner. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the current prime minister of Malaysia, is chairman of the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference and an Islamic scholar. Given that Malaysia is having serious problems with Islamic fundamentalism from within, Abdullah is spearheading what he calls Islam Hadhari that pertains to Muslims only. In his recent Hari Raya speech with the theme [Correct Western perception of Islam](#), he addresses Muslims only.

As a Tamil Malaysian woman, I wonder what an impact Abdullah would have, not just in Malaysia, but in other Islamic countries if he were to begin to give speeches to this effect: 'Correct Muslim perceptions of the West'.

Americans and the international community who want to see an end to the war in Iraq, terrorism and the safe return of their troops need to be paying close attention to the development of political Islam in Malaysia - whatever form it takes. Abdullah has introduced Islamisation programmes to counter the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism not just in Malaysia but also in other Islamic countries. Here are the 10 points of the chairman of the OIC countries (for Muslims only) in a multicultural/multireligious country:

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- Faith and piety in Allah
- A just and trustworthy government
- A free and independent people
- Mastery of knowledge
- Balanced and comprehensive development
- A good quality of life
- Protection of the rights of minority groups and women
- Cultural and moral integrity
- Protection of the environment
- Strong defences

LETTERS

Sounds good. The only exception here is that non-Muslim Malaysians and women are excluded from this Utopian idea of a 'just' government. I don't understand how an Islamic scholar can justify piety with the injustice of consistently excluding a significant segment of his population when speaking to the Malaysian people. This is racial politics disguised as religious politics. We are not blind.

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That conversation/dialogue that Stengal calls for can happen in the US and Western countries but what happens in Malaysia and other Muslim countries is a monologue. We will begin to solve the problem of violence in Iraq when the prime minister of Malaysia changes his conversation significantly and identifies himself as a man different from the former prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In other words, we need to be hearing from the prime minister of Malaysia, chairman of the 57-nation OIC, words that reflect critical thinking pertaining to the foundations of freedom that Chinese and Indian Malaysians are able to hear, understand and adopt into their lives.

For as long as I remember, the West has been vilified one way or another in Malaysia. Muslim Malaysians are constantly being exhorted to be more pious than the West. The examples that are held up for Muslims, even young impressionable 18-year-old at schools and colleges, are negative examples.

For example: One is not allowed to juxtapose a speech by Mahathir with one by Abraham Lincoln.

Speaking from personal experience, as a former Institute Teknologi Mara 'English as a second language' lecturer, one's contract will be terminated for teaching critical thinking. For myself, it was merely loss of a job. In the long term, for Muslim Malaysians, it is the loss of minds. The ability to think critically and engage with the rest of the world - whether our immediate neighbour or someone on the other side of the world - is crucial to the success of our communities and cultures.

Muslim Malaysians need Abdullah to engage the precious ideas of freedom that the US, Europe and now China and India are embracing. It is fine to embrace Islam and to hold it close to your heart but your mind must also be able to recognise the political, social and cultural realities of a world peopled by 6.2 billion others of varying beliefs.

If Abdullah is proposing a just and trustworthy government within the context of this new Islam, he is going to have to repeal Malaysia's apartheid policies publicly. I look forward to significant developments in Malaysia and the ripple effect to be seen in other Islamic countries. The 57-nation OIC can then align itself with Western countries and become an influential force for good by quite simply changing its conversation and focus.

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