

Multicultural Symposium in Malaysia Explored Strengths and Problems of Diversity in Australian and Malaysian Societies

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Prior to my recent trip to Malaysia, I proposed an international symposium on “Multiculturalism in the Contemporary World: Sociological and Religious Perspectives” to Associate Professor Isharaf Hossain, Co-Founder of Muslim World Research Centre (MWRC) based in Kuala Lumpur. Director of the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIUM), Professor Waleed Faris at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) joined him to organise a day-long symposium on Wednesday, 28 August 2019 at the Library Auditorium of IIUM.

From Australia, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Toowoomba, and Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) supported the symposium. Reputed Malaysian sponsors included Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and Islamic Renaissances Front (IRF), Malaysia.

In the Opening Session of the symposium the Deputy Rector (Internationalisation and Global Network) of IIUM, Professor Dr Nor Faridah Bt. Abdul Manaf emphasised the value of international engagements on diversity and welcomed the participants and presenters to the IIUM. Professor Dr Tahir El Mesawi, (IIUM), Dr Rateb Jneid, (President of AFIC), and Professor Dr Shahjahan Khan (USQ, Australia) highlighted the importance of discussing issue related multiculturalism in Australia and Malaysia as the world has becoming more and more diverse in terms of ethnic, cultural and religious differences.

In my short talk, I emphasized that cultural diversity is a reality of the modern world. We live in culturally diverse communities. Large scale migration and mass movement of large number of refugees have made this diversity a reality almost all over the world. As a consequence, it has become essential to come up with a common social narrative that ensures inclusiveness of every individual in the community. No single narrative under any ethnic or cultural or religious umbrella would provide a common identity of a nation with diverse population. Multiculturalism is an inclusive social and political term that proves a platform to unite people of different origin and persuasion. This is particularly important for the minority communities to safeguard their cultural identity while becoming an integral part of the wider society.

The main speakers in the two morning sessions were Professor Dr Shahjahan Khan (USQ), Dr Rateb Jneid (AFIC), Dr Leon Moosavi, (University of Liverpool), Professor Peter T C Chang (University of Malaya), Professor Siraj Siat (WASD), Assoc. Professor Muniruzzaman (IIUM), Professor Dr Tahir El Mesawi, (IIUM), Dato Faruk Musa, (IRF, Malaysia), Assoc. Professor Imtiaz Yusuf, (ISTAC, IIUM), Dr Gary Dargon (Sydney, Australia), and Assoc. Professor Isharaf Hossain, (MWRC, Malaysia).

I covered the Multicultural Statement (united, strong, successful) of Australian Federal Government (2017), Multicultural Queensland Charter (2017) and USQ Multicultural policy and strategies in my presentation. Dr Rateb Jneid stressed the problems faced by Muslims in Multicultural Australia, especially that fuelled by the extreme, divisive, hateful and anti-Muslim political activism.

The afternoon session was a roundtable discussion forum moderated by Professor El Mesawi. Many issues, problems and prospects of multiculturalism were openly discussed in this

session by representatives of many academic, research, community, ethnic and religious bodies in Malaysia.

In this session, I focussed on the status of human on earth from the Qur'anic description of 'khalifa' (representative) and 'insan' (mankind), and that each one was invoked with the spirit (rooh) of Allah, and that He has created each human with best stature and honoured the son of Adam. As a blessed creation with the spirit of Allah every human being deserves to be respected regardless of race, gender, religion and ethnicity.

Many nations in the contemporary world are facing various problems to manage their diverse population and find common narrative to include people from different ethnic, cultural, and religious origin. This is a real challenge for many developed and developing countries, especially those with significant migrant population.

The peace, stability and development of those countries are largely dependent on successfully managing the diverse population and engage them in productive activities with mutual respect and dignity. Ensuring sense of belongingness and acknowledging the contribution of every citizen are essential for effective full participation of the people in nation building activities.

No single narrative under any ethnic or cultural or religious umbrella would provide a common identity of a nation with diverse population. Multiculturalism is an inclusive social and political term that proves a platform to unite people of different origin and persuasion. This is particularly important for the minority communities to safeguard their cultural identity while becoming an integral part of the wider society. Multiculturalism considers diversity as a strength to contribute to the nation rather than dividing the population along the religious and ethnic lines.

Malaysia is a multiracial and multi-faith society. It has population from different ethnic and religious origin. So, it faces very similar social and political issues and problems to those in other countries with culturally diverse population. Finding common ground among people is essential to unite them for the nation building. Multiculturalism provides such a common identity for everyone without compromising their diverse individual cultural, ethnic and religious identity and commitment.