

## *Research Notes*

# **Muslim Identity in the Speeches of Mahathir Mohamad**

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**Abstract:** Islam is a misunderstood religion and Muslims suffer from a negative image of being violent and terrorist. The Western projection of the Muslim image falls short of the real identity of Muslims. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, considered outspoken by the West, has not only set the foundation for the materialization of the true Muslim identity but has also been bold enough to point out the weaknesses of the Muslim communities of the world. An analysis of selected speeches and an interview of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia shows how he constructs and consolidates the Muslim identity in his discourse from a critical discourse analysis perspective.

Islam is the most misunderstood religion of this world, in spite of the fact that it has 1.3 billion believers or followers. Despite their ignorance, many people speak out and express their abhorrence against Muslims and Islam as a whole. They have increasingly assigned to the religion of Islam the epithet of terrorist doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The misconceptions of Islam and Muslims have given rise to Islamophobia: a fear and hatred for people who follow, believe in and practice the Islamic faith. Peace-loving Muslims around the world are victims of hate crimes/killings. They are victimised and

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persecuted.<sup>2</sup> Gomez and Smith say that in Asia, the minority Muslims who are dwelling in the nation states and despite actively collaborating in the US-led global war on terrorism feel threatened and highly vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> For obvious economic, political and social reasons, the Western world cannot afford to continually keep on misunderstanding a rapidly growing religious community that has surpassed the one billion mark.<sup>4</sup> In order to better understand Islam and further improve relations between Western and Muslim countries, some measures need to be taken including religious dialogues, academic, scientific, and cultural exchanges, joint publications and media cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, has set the foundation for the materialization of the true Muslim identity and has also pointed out the weaknesses of the Muslim community. This article analyses his discourses from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

One of the prime objectives of CDA is to unearth, bring to the surface or make apparent the not so apparent issues that may exist in a society; in doing so, it (CDA) tries to empower the general public with the knowledge of knowing what they originally did not know.<sup>6</sup> Once a community or a society becomes aware of the issues that may have escaped their common senses, they will be in an empowered position to choose what to believe and what not to believe, what is authentic and what is doubtful or questionable.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, CDA through the analysis of discourse, focuses on real issues and real problems in the society and the world at large, like “globalization, social exclusion, shifts in governance, and so forth.”<sup>8</sup> Wodak tends to think of it as an instrument “whose purpose is precisely to expose veiled power structures: “CDA aims to make more visible these opaque aspects of discourse.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, it deals with social inequality; and Van Dijk is of the opinion that though this (social inequality) may be approached from many directions CDA analysts focus on “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance.”<sup>10</sup>

Of the host of principles of CDA, this article applies the following:

1. Power relations are discursive: CDA highlights the substantively linguistic and discursive nature of social relations of power

relations in contemporary societies. This is partly a matter of how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse. Hence, CDA studies both power in discourse and power over discourse.

2. Discourse does ideological work: Ideologies are particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation. Ideologies are often (though not necessarily) false or ungrounded constructions of society. To determine whether a particular type of discursive event does ideological work, it is not enough to analyse texts—one also needs to consider how texts are interpreted and received and what social effect texts have.
3. Discourses are historical and can only be understood in relation to their context. They are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically. Discourses are not only embedded in a particular culture, ideology or history, but are also connected intertextually to other discourses.<sup>11</sup>

### **Data**

From the perspective of CDA, Mahathir Mohamad seems to be a bona fide CDA analyst in the sense that he is able to decipher and expose the ideologies of the West so that the common people may be empowered and are able to recognize the right from the wrong. Looking at things from a CDA perspective will enable them to be more discerning, critical and conscious about the social practices of the society and not take everything for granted or at face value.<sup>12</sup> Mahathir Mohamad presents such a perspective in his speeches and interviews, portraying the apparent situation, whether it is regarding Western ideology or Muslim complacency.

The data that were analyzed in this non-experimental descriptive study comprised of five speeches and an interview:

- i. "Understanding Islam and the Muslims," Kuala Lumpur, 25 May 1999 (Text 1);
- ii. "The Role of Islam in the Modern State," New York, USA, 3 February 2002 (Text 2);

- iii. "Islam and the Ummah: Re-examining and Reinventing Ourselves in the Face of New Challenges," University of London, London, 22 September 2003 (Text 3);
- iv. "Muslim Unity in the Face of Challenges and Threats," University Al Azhar, Cairo, Egypt, 21 January 2003 (Text 4);
- v. "The Opening of the Tenth Session of The Islamic Summit Conference," Putrajaya Convention Centre, Putrajaya, 16 October 2003 (Text 5);
- vi. "Dr Mahathir on Talking Point BBC World TV," broadcasted on BBC World Service Radio and BBC World TV on Sunday, 12 October 2003 at 1400 GMT—10.0 p.m. Malaysian time (Text 6).<sup>13</sup>

The speeches and the interview were selected on the basis of their focus and orientation towards the present predicament of Muslims around the world. For ease of analysis, the five speeches are denoted as Text 1-5 respectively and the interview as Text 6.

### **Mahathir Mohamad: The Visionary**

One of the true visionaries of the age, Mahathir Mohamad is revered and feared, the world over, for his explicit opinions regarding the ideologies of the West. His "Look East" policies, handling of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the determined efforts to motivate the Muslims and uphold the *ummah* in context of the real world have made him a champion among the Asian, particularly the Southeast Asian, nations. His 22 years in power has not only transformed Malaysia into one of the richest nations in Asia but his efforts to internationalize the country has also put this multicultural and multiethnic nation on the map.

His capacity to critically analyze the ideologies of the West and counter such ideologies have earned him the title of an outspoken leader. In his endless efforts to serve the Muslim *ummah*, he has always tried to convey the fundamental teachings of Islam and emphasize the necessity of a globally united Muslim community. His efforts are multi-faceted in the sense that he has condemned the US-led war on Afghanistan and Iraq, called on Muslim countries to embrace modernity, and opened a global conference (July, 2003) of Islamic scholars with the aim of countering misconceptions about

Islam.<sup>14</sup> He has also been critical of what he calls the endless wars of Europe and its colonies and is of the opinion that the reaction to the 9/11 attacks indicated the return of the old ways of attacking Muslims and their nations, whether they are guilty or not.<sup>15</sup>

### Analysis

The fact of Islam being a misunderstood religion, whether due to its misconceptions or misinterpretations, has always been emphasised by Mahathir Mohamad as follows:

... the present-day perception of Islam both by Muslims and by non-Muslims is quite different and very often at variance with the teachings of Islam as practised by the early Muslims...

... the stereotyping of the Muslims as undisciplined backward people, unsociable, fanatical fundamentalists who are given to terrorism. That terrorism is not a monopoly of the Muslims is ignored entirely. Every terrorist act is attributed to Muslims until proven otherwise (Text 1).

Islam is a religion of peace and moderation. If it does not appear to be so today, it is not because of the teachings of Islam but the interpretations made by those apparently learned in Islam to suit their patrons or their own vested interest (Text 2).

Clearly the teachings of Islam is being wrongly interpreted (Text 3).

Some of these interpretations and teachings are so different from each other that their followers actually accuse each other of not being Muslims.

Because of the thousands of different interpretations of Islam and very many different sects, each claiming to be the true followers of Islam, the Muslims are thoroughly confused (Text 4).

... the *ulamas* have interpreted and reinterpreted the single Islamic religion brought by Prophet Muhammad S.A.S., so differently that now we have a thousand religions which are often so much at odds with one another that we often fight and kill each other (Text 5).

It is the lack of understanding of Islam that has led to this present situation. Not only a lack of understanding among the non-Muslims, even Muslims have subjected to different interpretations of Islam.

... the non-Muslims seem to think of the Muslims as being monolithic and their attitude towards Muslims is uniform whether the Muslims are Sunni or Shias or whatever. They seem to think that any Muslim is incapable of being normal or being rational (Text 6).

Because of its misinterpretations and/or misconceptions, he considers it necessary to explain the “fundamental” teachings of the religion by referring to its history or by pointing out historical evidences when Muslims lived side by side with other religions.

Islamic civilisation in Spain reached its peak of glory when Muslims were tolerant of others and were prepared to learn from them. In Muslim Spain, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived side by side. Many were the Jews and Christians who served in the courts of the Muslim rulers and in their Governments (Text 1).

He concludes that the downfall of Muslims began with their rejection of certain learning which they erroneously considered non-religious; this was instigated by some of the *‘ulamā’*, who wanted to hold on to their authorities and positions for political gains.

As the Muslims turned away from all learning which were not exclusively about religion, their skills deteriorated. They became weak and were unable to match the sophistication of European sciences, weaponry and military prowess. Eventually they lost their Spanish Empire (Text 1).

...political ulamas reject knowledge that is not specifically religious for fear that such people might challenge their authority (Text 2).

When explaining the notions of Islam and its teachings, Mahathir Mohamad stresses that it is a peace loving religion. It is the responsibility of Muslims to embrace its “fundamental” teachings and apply its philosophy in relation to the self, community, society and the world at large—personally and professionally. He said:

Islam is a religion of peace and moderation.

Islam abhors wars of aggression and the killing of innocent people.

Defensive wars are permitted but should the enemy sue for peace, Muslims must respond positively (Text 2).

Islam as all Muslims know is not just a religion, a belief in the one God, Allah, in His Prophet. It is not just about the performance of certain rituals, the avoidance of sins. Islam is a way of Life—*al din*. Islam governs every aspect of the life of the Muslims. It guides

their behaviour and everything that they do, as individuals, as a community.

The Muslim belongs not just to himself. He belongs to the Muslim community, the ummah. The well-being of the ummah is the responsibility of all the members of the Muslim community.

Islam means peace. We wish peace upon each other. This is also fundamental to Islam (Text 3).

In the present era, according to Mahathir Mohamad, Muslims are probably the most oppressed of all people, they are belittled, disrespected and killed. This is apparent from the following texts:

There can be no doubt that today the most oppressed people in the world are the Muslims. Their independence and their rights as members of the human race have been ignored and violated over and over again. Their countries have been subjected to sanctions, to bombings, to all kinds of humiliation (Text 1).

There has never been a time when the Muslims are so looked down upon, so treated with disrespect and so oppressed as they are today. Everywhere Muslims are bullied, detained bombed and massacred with impunity (Text 4).

Today we, the whole Muslim ummah are treated with contempt and dishonour. Our religion is denigrated. Our holy places desecrated. Our countries are occupied. Our people starved and killed (Text 5).

For this, he partially blames the non-Muslims, and again resorts to history to prove his point. When it comes to strategic oppression and acts of terror, the West are the most brutal, concludes Mahathir. Despite such oppression, associations of terrorism are not made in relation to their ethnicity or religion. He also says that killings by other religions are not connected to acts of terror or terrorism.

The non-Muslims are at least partly to blame because they often propagate ideas about Islam and Muslims which are negative.

Among ethnic Europeans the memories of the Crusade and the conquest of European land by Muslims many centuries ago are kept alive. Every fault of the Muslims is enlarged and linked with the religion even though it may have nothing to do with Islam.

In terms of terror and systematic oppression the ethnic Europeans have no match. Hitler's massacre of six million Jews ranks as the most heinous in the 20th Century. And now we are witnessing the mass-killings of the Albanians in Kosovo, which was preceded by

the massacre of hundreds of thousands of the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet all these acts by ethnic Europeans are never described as European terrorism or Christian terrorism.

Even Buddhists have thrown up a number of terrorists as witness the killings by the shadowy Japanese Buddhist cult. Hindus have massacred Muslims off and on in India (Text 1).

It appears that not only are Muslims oppressed, tortured and killed, but they have also lost their independence and are under constant pressure to conform according to the ideologies of the oppressors. Mahathir Mohamad points out that the oppressors are free to do whatever they like: raid, kill and destroy:

None of our countries are truly independent. We are under pressure to conform to our oppressors' wishes about how we should behave, how we should govern our lands, how we should think even.

Today if they want to raid our country, kill our people, destroy our villages and towns, there is nothing substantial that we can do (Text 5).

However, he does not shy away from asserting that the Muslims themselves are partly to blame for their predicament. The Muslims of today tend to detach themselves from others, hardly bothering to propagate inter-religious relations. He even acknowledges that out of anger and desperation, Muslims sometimes kill, irrespective of the consequences. He laments chaotic retaliation and the killing of innocent people.

... Muslims are equally to be blamed for their ugly reputation, their poor image and their isolation.

Today Muslims are seen to be aloof and isolated even when they live in communities which have large numbers of non-Muslims. They are seldom regarded as practising and contributing towards inter-religious understanding. (Text 1)

... the fact is that we are killing people because of our anger regardless of who we kill, regardless of the consequences. Admittedly we are desperate and outgunned and there is very little else we can do to defend ourselves against the injustice perpetrated against us. But should we just lash out indiscriminately, killing innocent people, including those who sympathise with us? (Text 3)

Stating some statistics, he asks the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) delegates why, despite the manpower, resources and

riches and the voting potential to assert influence, Muslims are still in such a predicament?

We are now 1.3 billion strong. We have the biggest oil reserve in the world. We have great wealth ... We are familiar with the workings of the world's economy and finances. We control 57 out of the 180 countries in the world. Our votes can make or break international organisations. Yet we seem more helpless than the small number of Jahilliah converts who accepted the Prophet as their leader. Why? (Text 5)

Mahathir Mohamad is a critical thinker and is able to decipher the ideology and the discourse of those who he considers as "the enemy." He is able to realize discursive notions of power relations in discourse and how the social relations of power are enacted in contemporary societies. He tells his audience that it is imperative to use our brains and not brawn, just as the "enemy" has done so to survive for 2000 years.

We are up against a people who think. They survived 2000 years of pogroms not by hitting back, but by thinking. They invented and successfully promoted Socialism, Communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so they may enjoy equal rights with others. With these they have now gained control of the most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power. We cannot fight them through brawn alone. We must use our brains also. (Text 5)

He knows, all too well, the power of rhetoric and its potential to expose the agendas and ideologies of the perpetrators of oppression. It is through the eloquence of rhetoric that one can win the sympathy and support of people.

Rhetoric is good. It helps us to expose the wrongs perpetrated against us, perhaps win us some sympathy and support. It may strengthen our spirit, our will and resolve, to face the enemy. (Text 5)

### **Principles of CDA in Perspective**

The problem that Islam and Muslims have been misunderstood in the West is not a recent phenomenon. Said's *Covering Islam* provides a detailed discussion of American media's negative representations of Muslims after the Iranian revolution in 1979.<sup>16</sup> Just after the September 11, 2001 incident when *Time* constructs the identity of a *shahid*, a Muslim martyr, it shows the same make-up of what Said

read 20 years back.<sup>17</sup> A number of studies on the representation of Muslims in the Western media show the persistence of this bias against Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the academia, in the field of world politics, the voice that rose above anything to a point that attracted the ears of the West is of Mahathir Mohamad. He has always emphasised the necessity for the “greater understanding of Islam and the Muslims,” by the West, “thus helping to disprove the perception of Islam as a religion of backwardness and terror” (Text 5).

Mahathir Mohamad discusses Islam in relation to “particular,” that is, what is happening in Malaysia and also in relation to “general,” the kind of “clash of civilisation” he refers to in “Talking Point BBC World TV” (Text 6), that is, the West’s response to a misunderstood Islam. Mahathir goes back and forth for the discursive construction of Muslim identity. He refers to the Islamic past to give a “wake-up call” to fellow Muslims and at the same time reminds them the kind of ignorance they are suffering from. It is no more *jāhiliyyah*, however, another kind of darkness has swallowed these Muslims, Mahathir contends. He is upset by the fact that Muslims have distanced themselves from the fundamentals of Islam. Muslims at present are busy at solving much trivial issues, like the dress code, or how to distance themselves from modern discoveries of science. Another finding by Mahathir is that “The Industrial Revolution was totally missed by the Muslims” (Text 5).

Muslims believe that “poverty is Islamic,” also “sufferings and being oppressed are Islamic.” Some believe that Muslims should not concentrate on this world as it is not for them: “Ours are the joys of heaven in the afterlife.” Therefore, Muslims are only supposed to “perform certain rituals, wear certain garments and put up a certain appearance” (Text 5).

Mahathir Mohamad always refers to the glorious Islamic past, its heritage. He reminds the Muslims of the early Islamic era, the Abbasid Caliphate (8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), when Muslims excelled in all the branches of knowledge. Muslims produced a number of scientists, scholars, physicians and astronomers who, besides studying and practising Islam, excelled in all the fields of knowledge of their time. They also showed their people an *al-dīn*, [a life] as prescribed by Islam.

The discursive construction of the Muslim identity in the public discourse (speeches and interviews) of Mahathir Mohamad may not be so optimistic as Muslims may wish it to be. Sometimes the truth may hurt, but the reality of the situation necessitates the truth to be told:

Many of you will say - who is he to talk about Islam. Don't listen to him even if what he says is true and is in accord with Islam. That is your choice. Whether you sin or you gain merit, Allah S.W.T. will determine. (Text 4)

From the analysis of the selected texts of Mahathir Mohamad's public discourse it seems that the predicament of the Muslims are partly due to the misconceptions/misunderstandings of the West and partly due to the varied interpretations of Islam and their unwillingness to seek knowledge beyond religious matters and their reluctance to embrace modernity.

To overcome the Muslim predicament, it is imperative for Muslims to unite and uphold the resilient identity of the Muslims and practice the true teachings of Islam. He is a realist and hence makes the pertinent observation that:

We may not be able to unite all the 1.3 billion Muslims. We may not be able to get all the Muslim Governments to act in concert. But even if we can get a third of the ummah and a third of the Muslim states to act together, we can already do something (Text 5).

## **Conclusion**

During the 22 years in power, Mahathir Mohamad has made many speeches and faced numerous interviews. The body of his public discourse presents analysts with a rich source of data comprising the historical and socio-political chronicles of Malaysia, Asia as well as the entire world. In a similar fashion, the selected texts that were analysed reflect the chronicles of Islam and the past and present predicaments of the Muslims.

Critical of the West and the Muslims at the same time, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's construction of the Muslim identity is perceivable through the selected principles of critical discourse analysis. Such analysis enables the identification of not only the predicaments that ail the Muslims but also the complacency within the Muslim community. In the long run, this may empower Muslims

to critically view the world, and even themselves for that matter, and not take everything at face value.

### Notes

1. Ralph H. Salmi, Cesar Adib Majul and George K. Tanham, *Islam and Conflict Resolution: Theories and Practices* (Boston: University Press of America, 1998), 7.
2. James Gomez and Alan Smith, "September 11 and Political Freedom: Asian perspectives," in *September 11 & Political Freedom: Asian perspectives*, Uwe Johannsen, Alan Smith and James Gomez, ed. (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2003), xxv.
3. Ibid.
4. Ralph Salmi et al., *Islam and Conflict Resolution*, 2.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Muhammed Shahriar Haque, "Identity in Conflict: Image and Reality of Bangladeshis in Malaysia," *BRAC University Journal*, 1, no. 1, (April 2004), 53-62.
7. Ibid.
8. Norman Fairclough, "The Discourse of New Labour: Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephen Taylor and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001), 229.
9. Ruth Wodak, *Discourse of Disorder* (London: Longman, 1996), 16.
10. Teun A. van Dijk, "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis" (1993), in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephen Taylor and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001), 300.
11. Stefan Titscher, Michael Meyer, Ruth Wodak and Eva Vetter, *Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis*, trans. Bryan Jenner (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 146; Ruth Wodak, *Discourse of Disorder*, 17-20.
12. Muhammed Shahriar Haque, "Identity in Conflict: Image and Reality of Bangladeshis in Malaysia," *BRAC University Journal*, I, no. 1, (April 2004), 53-62.
13. The speeches are available at: [http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vfs\\_Tun\\_Spe?OpenFrameSet](http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vfs_Tun_Spe?OpenFrameSet).
14. Opening commentary on Mahathir Mohamad by Lyse Doucet Talking Point BBC World TV (broadcasted on BBC World Service Radio and BBC World TV on Sunday, 12 October 2003 at 1400 GMT, 10.0 p.m.). Available at [http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/ontent.asp?pg=special/others/Drm\\_talkingpoint\\_bbc.htm](http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/ontent.asp?pg=special/others/Drm_talkingpoint_bbc.htm) (Accessed on 27.06.2004).

15. Ibid.

16. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 17. *Time*, September 24 2001, 24.

18. Karim H. Karim, "The Historical Resilience of Primary Stereotypes: Core Images of the Muslim Other," in *The Language and Politics of Exclusion: Others in Discourse*, ed., Stephen H. Riggins (London: Sage Publications, 1998); Mahmud Hasan Khan, "The Discursive Construction of Afghan National Identity in *Time* and *Newsweek*" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2003); Mahmud Hasan Khan and Adrien E. Hare, "The Discursive Construction of an Afghan National Identity in *Time* and *Newsweek*," *Intellectual Discourse*, 12, no.1 (2004); Melissa Hussain, "The Demale Subaltern in the Post-9-11 World: Some Reflections," *Meghbarata* (June/July Issue, 2003).