



OFFICE OF DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM

OPENING ADDRESS BY ANWAR IBRAHIM AT THE L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES CONFERENCE-DEBATE ON "ISLAM AND THE WEST AFTER GEORGE BUSH", IN PARIS, CHAIRED BY MICHEL CAMDESSUS. JUNE 3, 2009

The discourse between Islam and the West as we know very well has been loaded with enormous historical baggage. It remains so today. What it tells us is that in as much as the interpretations of history differ and diverge so do the perceptions about Islam and the West. Today, regardless of George Bush, there continues to be a clash of interpretations on the subject.

Ironically, the clash is not about God. It is not a clash between the Church and the state as typified by that part of Western history as we know it. Bashing the Church is no longer considered a healthy intellectual sport and the concept of secularism itself is considered passé in many conversations.

In fact, if we look further, we ought to see centripetal forces at work. John Locke's doctrine of the inviolability of human life and property finds resonance in the Prophetic tradition so well known to Islamic scholars: "O mankind, your blood, your property and your honour are as sacred as this Holy Land."

Lockean principles as transmitted down the French and American constitutional grundnorms bear striking resemblance to the *maqasid al-sharia*, the higher objectives of Islamic Law, as expounded in the 8th century, which sanctify the preservation of religion, life, intellect, family, and wealth.

Yet in current discourses, we are seeing still centrifugal forces being brought to bear and giving rise to the now infamous notion of a clash of civilizations. Even after three decades of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the specter of Islamic fundamentalism haunts

our forums clinging tenaciously to the notion of Islam as a religion of violence, extremism and terrorism and the rejection of democracy and human rights. These misgivings persist in spite of what has taken place in Indonesia, now the worlds largest Muslim democracy, and no less significantly in Turkey. And it is this fundamental belief which provides the sowing of fields of discord between Islam and the West, whether before George Bush or after him.

So today, despite the shared belief in universal values which are as integral to Enlightenment Europe as they are to the classical period of Islamic history, Islam and the West are still juxtaposed as opposites.

It is worth mentioning even the observations of the Azharite scholar Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, who visited this city in the early 19th century and took note of the revolutionary motto, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Initially perplexed by the direct translation of the word freedom, which in the Arabic context generally referred to the condition of a freed slave, he later realised that the more accurate rendition of the motto's underlying gist in his mother tongue was concept of *'adl* – justice, which is nothing short of one of the Divine Attributes in Islam and a prevailing concern of Muslim scholars and theologians since time immemorial.

Globalization, in principle, at least requires that we overcome that which divides us. In the coming decades humanity must find ways to overcome the immense challenges of climate change, poverty and the drying up of energy resources. Sustainable development of the vast majority of the world's population remains a significant challenge, particularly in times of recession. These are problems of monumental proportion and are best solved as a community of nations working together.

This effort would require people guided not just by self-interest or the interest of the nation but rather individuals of impeccable credentials inspired by basic ethical and moral concerns of justice, human dignity and mutual understanding.

Barack Obama has assumed the office of the President of the United States at a moment when the relationship between Islam and the West is among the most important political and social issues in the world. We see in him a leader committed to the values of freedom and democracy, and a president who believes that the critical issues dividing the United States and the Muslim world can be resolved not through fiery rhetoric and bellicose language but by positive engagement in a language of mutual respect.

His administration has made some positive moves in its early days. A tangible end to the Arab-Israeli conflict is not yet visible; however, the appointment of George Mitchell as Middle East envoy is a welcome step. The language of fairness and balance now injected into this long-standing conflict by Obama in recent days is a welcome respite from previous administrations. America's anticipated withdrawal from Iraq, though delayed, is well regarded, as is a rethinking of its approach in Afghanistan. The opening of the books, so to speak, on torture and detainee abuse is a painful and cathartic process. A proper accounting of the abuses, as well as the closure of Guantanamo Bay, will go far in helping the US to regain its international credibility.

While President Obama has espoused a message of peace he must nevertheless contend with issues of nuclear proliferation and terrorism. His message of engagement and dialogue resonates with the vast population of Muslims now living in Europe and the United States. But integration evokes powerful emotions. Thanks no doubt to the historical baggage and the heavy load of prejudices that come along with it, Turkey has not found it easy in its bid to join the European Union. France and England have faced violent riots emanating from the ghettoized populations of Muslims who now call the major European population centers their own homes. The furor that erupted over the Danish cartoons reflects both the deplorable condition of Muslim-West relations and the challenges we still face in developing a language of mutual respect with which to engage both sides.

Barack Obama will speak in Cairo tomorrow as he delivers a highly anticipated address to the Muslim world. His tone and demeanor will be a far cry from the belligerent and

aggressive stance taken by the previous administration. As he said in his inaugural address:

To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

To my mind, these words indicate that for there to be a certain *rapprochement* from the United States, America must find credible partners with whom it can deal.

While I would continue no doubt to advocate that Europe and the United States pursue an open door policy in promoting freedom and democracy, I must once again say that the conviction to move from autocracy to democracy must emanate from the Muslim countries themselves.

It is true that the existence of extremists in Muslim countries is no figment of the imagination, but they are by products of a society without accountability, freedom or democracy. These are states led by autocrats who have received financial and military support of the democratic West, particularly America. Obama's efforts in this regard ought to be directed towards formulating policies that achieve America's strategic objectives without compromising the democratic forces in the Muslim world. Support for regimes that cannot be held accountable to their own citizens is recipe for long-term failure despite the possibility of short-term gains. There should be no more equivocal actions and the foreign policy of selective ambivalence must end.

Regrettably, under George Bush substantial Muslim communities in the West were given the short end of the stick when the democratic institutions came under assault all in the name of the war on terror. It is significant that President Obama has deleted this phrase from the language of American foreign policy. The erosion of fundamental liberties should not be condoned anywhere.

And this is not academic hair-splitting. We know that issues of abuse of executive power and violation of fundamental liberties, as well as governance and accountability still loom large, continuing to cast doubts upon the legitimacy of ruling elites. Gender rights, labour laws, treatment of detainees and the repression of political parties are facts of life in most Muslim countries.

Reform is no longer an option. There must be firm resolve borne out of the efforts of leaders and with the support of institutions of civil society to bring about the right changes.

Even if we are agreed that Muslims must be committed to change, the question that remains is how we can proceed. Real engagement must be inclusive. We should not start by building a wall around ourselves, setting preconditions, and prejudging groups and parties. These impediments only serve to strengthen old prejudices and further sow suspicion and doubt. If the notion of the universalism of Islam is to mean anything, it would require that its values of justice, compassion and tolerance be practiced everywhere. Can we remain blind to the injustice perpetrated in non-Muslim countries? Should we not also relate to the suffering of other minorities in Muslim countries? And our condemnation against the violation of human rights must transcend race, colour or creed. But we should do well to remember that no nation, no region, and no culture or religion has a monopoly on the values of freedom, justice and human dignity. If we seek to engage in dialogue between Islam and the West that is meaningful, then let it be based on these universal principles that we all share.

Thank you.