

Initiatives of Change Conference:

## "AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

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Session: "Living with the neighbour who is different: discovering the other", 13 January 2007

### **Abdul Mukti:**

Living in peaceful and harmonious relations with neighbour is an important aspect of Islamic teaching. In Islamic teaching, it is obligatory for Muslim to respect, protect and helpful to neighbour.

*"And worship God and associate naught with Him, do good to parents, the kinsmen, the orphans, the beggars, the neighbour who is of kin and the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion at your side, the traveller, and the slaves under your possession. God does not love the proud and boastful."* (The Qur'an; Chapter 4, an-Nisa, verse 36).

*"Those who believe in God and the Hereafter are those who sincerely respect their neighbour"* (Hadith of Prophet Muhammad narrated by Buchari and Muslim).

*"Indeed, they are not true believers. Indeed, they are not true believers. Indeed, they are not true believers. One companion asked: O Prophet, who are they? Prophet Muhammad replied: those whose behaviours caused insecurity of their neighbour."* (Hadith of Prophet Muhammed narrated by Thabrani).

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I am coming from a devoted Muslim family. I grew up in a religious Muslim kampong which holds a very strong religious tradition. I had no experience living with neighbours who have different religion and tradition during my childhood. Having this religious and traditional background, I had less respect and intolerance to non Muslim people.

My perception and attitude toward people from different religion have changed significantly since 1994 when I attended English pre-departure course post-graduate studies sponsored by the AusAID. The course that was held in Denpasar, Bali, gave me "A strange" situation. In the classroom, I had to learn with non-Muslim classmates: Hindus, Christians and Catholics. While in daily activities, after class, I lived in strong Hindu society. For the first month, it was not easy for me to adapt to new environment, tradition and culture. The main obstacle was, of course, my religious and traditional backgrounds. Balinese eat pork, which is prohibited by Islam. Balinese are devoted and committed to Hindu religion that is full of mysticism, a practice that is contradictory with basic Islam theology. Dogs are everywhere in Bali. While in my kampong, people hated dog because of their understanding that dog is a "dirty" animal which Muslims have to avoid.

Personal interactions with classmates and people subsequently change my behaviour. Regular and intensive class attendance created close relationships among participants. We were good friends, despite our different religious backgrounds. Social interaction and dialogue with my Balinese neighbours developed my understanding about Hindu religion and Balinese tradition. There are differences between Islam, Hindu, Catholic and Christian but there are similarities between religions especially those dealing with social and moral matters. These similarities are factors that bound me with others.

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I had more complex experience living with neighbour who is different during my Master study in Adelaide, Australia. I lived in Tonsley courts whereby about 80 flats are sited. My landlord was a Spanish man. My closest neighbour was Australian and French families. Some of them were Christian and Catholic. My closest Indonesian neighbour was Javanese-Catholic family. With this Catholic family, we (I and my wife) share the same culture. Both of us are Javanese people. Quite frequently we speak Javanese. As in Javanese culture, we share our food with neighbour. Relationship went naturally. But, some day, we face a reality that we are different. "Tension" happened when my wife asked about fried chicken given to my family. She asked whether the chicken is halal or haram.

According to our understanding, although physically chicken, meat and other food are halal, if they are not slaughtered in accordance with Islam teaching - uttering the name of Allah - they are not halal. Our Catholic neighbour did not understand about this. It was our mistake that we did not explain our belief. After that, we explain about the meaning of halal food and show them place to buy halal food in Adelaide. Similar situation happened when we received invitation for lunch or dinner by my supervisor or university staff. Food could separate us from others, but having understanding and respect, we can share food at the same table.

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How could we generate a harmonious neighbourhood relationship between countries? For example, is neighbourhood relationship between Indonesia and Australia. Geographically, these two countries are close. But building up harmonious relationships between them has been not always easy. Most of Indonesian view Australia as "west" country. It is a Christian country. This viewpoint is wrong. But it takes time to change this misunderstanding, giving the fact that historically, culturally and politically, Australia has been closer to European and American countries than Asian countries. In relation with Indonesia, Australia has been concerned with development in Eastern Part of Indonesia whereby majority of people are Christian. Australian Universities work more closely with Christian educational institution and NGO's rather than those of Muslim. To some extent, misunderstanding also strengthen by media which tend to report "negative" treatment of Muslim in Australia, both by people and government. Some Indonesian believe that Australia, directly or indirectly, contribute to separation of East Timor as an Independence state and facilitate separatist groups in Eastern part of Indonesia. To some degree there are stereotype and prejudice toward Australian.

Situation gradually changed after serious efforts to set up a better relationships dedicated by leaders of the two countries. Both government encourage and facilitate people to people relations through some cultural, educational and humanitarian programs. Exchange teacher program that brings Indonesian teacher to teach Bahasa Indonesia and culture in Australian schools seems quite successful. Similarly, the Indonesia-Australian Young Muslim Leaders Exchange that has been conducted for four years also able to introduce and develop better understanding among future leaders of the nations. Humanitarian aid by Australian funding agencies with Muslim NGO's such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, especially those for Aceh and Yogyakarta Tsunami victims has resulted in better appreciation and respect among Indonesian for Australia. Australian government assistance for Islamic educational institutions, *madrasah* and *pesantren*, has changed the existing perception that Australia is a Christian country.

Indonesian understanding about Australia is improving in line with the increased number of Indonesians studying in Australia. Their direct experience and observation about Australia develop positive image and emotional attachment with Australia. If government of Indonesia and Australia could facilitate people to people cultural and educational programs initiated by institutions or NGO's in the two countries likely engagement between people of the two countries.

Based on my personal experience, we could attain peaceful and harmonious relations with neighbour who is different if: (1) we are aware of our differences with neighbour; (2) understand the source of our differences; (3) respect the differences with sincerity; (4) openness to discuss problems; (5) develop cooperation on the basis of shared similarities.

In this respect, the conference of Living With The Neighbour Who Is Different organised by Initiatives of Change Australia is very strategic. It is the beginning of building up a world harmony.

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