

Time for 'software'

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Recently, Islam Hadhari (civilisationa Islam) as a concept received the unanimous support of the National Fatwa. Council as a way forward to make Malaysia more dynamic and progressive (NST, May 7).

It is time then to translate the concept into action, as an approach that emphasises development, consistent with the tenets of Islam, like many other belief systems, through the mastery of knowledge.

Indeed, among the 10 principles of Islam Hadhari, seeking knowledge and education is strongly featured.

Others include good governance, a balanced economy, justice and trustworthiness, care for the environment, care for the minority and women, cultural and moral integrity, good quality of life, and strong defences.

In fact, none of these can be achieved if education remains a one-track, monochromatic orthodoxy.

It is, therefore, understandable why the Prime Minister had earlier called for nothing less than an education revolution, more than a year ago on Jan 13, 2004.

And more recently, he urged the same at the Eighth Prime Ministerial Address at the Harvard Club of Malaysia's 21st anniversary (NST, May 6).

This time he emphasised the need for an education system to produce not only smart students but are also for them to be aware of their social responsibilities.

One of the landmark suggestions was to allow students to study a variety of subjects rather than to stream them early.

He was quoted as saying that "in our system, we start to branch out very early. In Form Four, they already specialised, pure science all the way."

Essentially, we have started to strait-jacket their thinking at such a tender age.

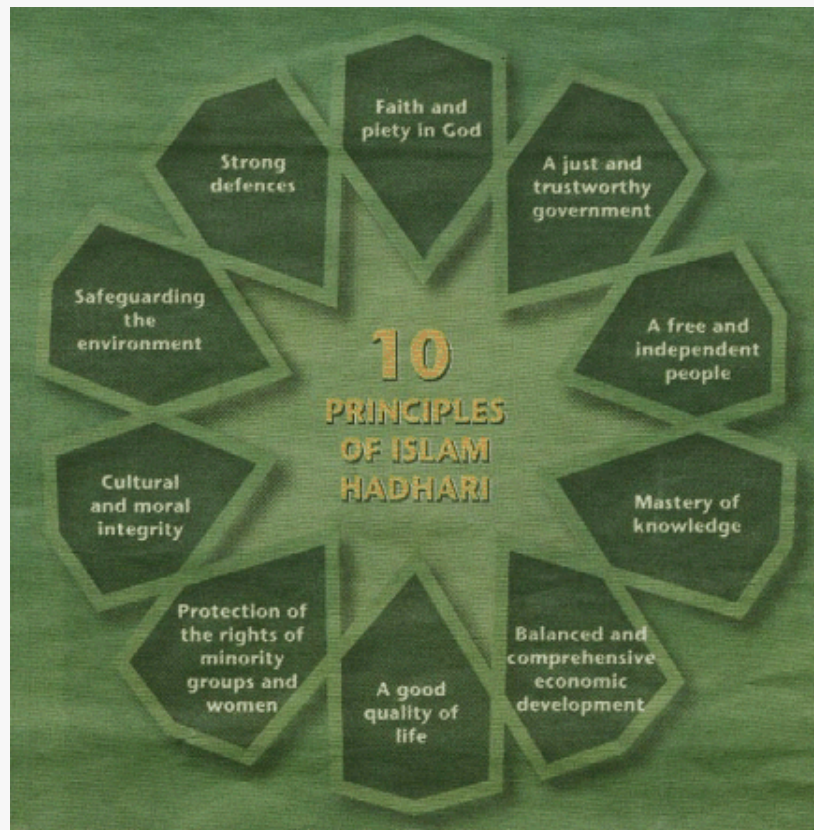
"It is not good that students (may I add, teachers and administrators, too) are not able to take up other subjects like economics and humanities."

He was quick to suggest that there "will be a major reform in the education system". We cannot agree more, and the sooner, the better.

He underlined the urgency of the situation when recognising that the phase of "hardware" or infrastructure development was over.

It is time to focus on the "software" aspect of development — on latest knowledge, cutting-edge skills and universal values.

This is consistent with his passion to build capacity for "human capital" or more appropriately "intellectual capital", while not forgetting the importance of "social capital".



Source: <http://www.islam.gov.my/islamhadhari/concept.html>

All these sound like new jargons, of course, and many would be alienated by it — surprisingly, the "smartest" among us will be the most affected.

To paraphrase, it is to dwell on "substance" rather than "form". The latter has been very much the focus in the last two decades, for which we are thankful.

Nevertheless, clearly this is not enough unless it is enriched by an intensely robust core — the brain power and attitude to match it so that we can pull the nation through.

Hence, we are back to the question of education, not limited to just passing exams, but one that change mindsets.

The Prime Minister was spot-on when he said: "Unfortunately, software development is largely intangible."

Meaning such changes will not be as glaring as building a towering physical superstructure, when compared to a towering personality, for example.

More importantly, it is not an easy task. The ultimate change, of course, is to move from a production-based society or economy to one that is knowledge based.

A good analogy between the two is to compare an automotive company that has plenty of physical assets relative to the intellectual ones, with that of a software (or a biotech for that matter) company that has the reverse.

Yet in terms of "value", it is not unusual to discover that the software or biotech company is more prized due to higher amount of intellectual capital, largely intangible, that goes into it.

An illustration perhaps is the comparison between General Motors and Microsoft.

This point must be fully appreciated, especially by those who are still operating on the old mindset, expecting to see things change at the snap of a finger — never mind if it is just cosmetic, unsustainable and for the sake of political expediency.

In other words, the real and deep-seated changes will not be plain sailing, involving a drastic shift in the fabric of our society to one that is "knowledge driven and performance based", keenly associated with "know-how" rather than "know who" as implied by the Prime Minister.

This is no doubt a "very ambitious journey", especially admittedly when our software development is still lagging far behind.

It goes without saying that in order to facilitate the development of "software", the spirit of free inquiry with free flow of ideas must be encouraged in the most creative way.

Strait-jacketed thinking will only hamper the growth of intellectual capital because, as Albert Einstein attested, problems created at one level of thinking can only be solved at a higher level of inquiry.

Here again, education has a key role to play, only if it is allowed to function autonomously, guided by academically-correct principles.

It is, therefore, refreshing to hear the Prime Minister reiterating that "civil society must be given the space to engage the Government and express their views constructively and responsibly".

This fits well with yet another important principle of Islam Hadhari — a free and independent people, a value that must be safeguarded and protected.

While there is now a sense of greater space for expression, it was marred by reports that the staff of a certain department were recently required to sign the Official Secret Act in the wake of an alleged corruption scandal.

Then some learned quarters urged the use of the Internal Security Act to deal with the diesel shortage, and there was the ludicrous suggestion to put drug addicts and HIV/AIDS patients on an island in the hope that the problems will go away.

These are worrying examples of strait-jacket myopic (un)thinking that will continue to shackle the minds of Malaysians, resulting in the "addicted" or "dependent" mentality that the Prime Minister lamented about.

The only way out of any "addiction" is to first of all admit that there is indeed a problem. The Prime Minister has courageously done so.

Indeed, he acknowledged that "the journey ahead will not be easy" and unreservedly vowed to "stay the course".

He has once again invited each and every Malaysian to join in and work with him.

Before taking up the offer, we first need to ensure that our "software" is upgraded; failing which, it will only result in business as usual with no hope for any meaningful change, come what may.

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