

## ***Conference Report***

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### **International Seminar on ‘Islam in Myanmar’**

A day-long international Seminar on Islam in Myanmar on the theme “*Democratization in Myanmar: Opportunities and Challenges for Its Muslim Community*” was held Conference Hall, IAIS Malaysia on April 29, 2012. International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia and Myanmar Muslim Intellectual Forum (MMIF) jointly organized the seminar in collaboration with International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) East Asia, Institute for the Study of the *Ummah* and Global Understanding (ISUGU) and Regional Islamic *Da'wah* Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP). Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar, Program Chairman and Deputy CEO, IAIS Malaysia and Dr Nay Aung Kyaw @ Mohammed Ali Hassan, Vice President, MMIF broke the ice with their welcoming addresses. Then Founding Chairman and CEO, IAIS Malaysia Professor Dr Hashim Kamali gave his opening speech while officiating address was delivered by Tun Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, Patron of IAIS Malaysia and Former Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The seminar had two sessions with a lunch in the middle. First Session was moderated by Ambassador Dato’ Dr. Mohd Yusof Ahmad, Principal Fellow and Director, Institute of ASEAN Studies and Global Affairs (INSPAG), University Technology MARA (UiTM), Malaysia and two speakers of this session were Dr Maung Maung @ Haji Mohammed Hussein, Executive Member, the Islamic Religious Affairs Council, Myanmar; and Mr Soe Myint Than, lecturer, MCC Training Institute, Mandalay Campus, Myanmar. After the lunch and *zuhr* prayer, the second session started at 2.30 pm which was moderated by Dr. Bakar where Maulana Akbar Shah @ U Tun Aung, lecturer, the Department of Islamic Studies, IIUM spoke on “*The Future of Muslim Youths in Myanmar: Opportunities and Challenges*” followed by the discussion of Ambassador Dato’ Mat Amir Jaafar, Expert, Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), University of Malaya. More than 300 participants including ambassadors, bureaucrats, academicians, researchers and students from different countries took part in this seminar to make it a success.

This seminar was the second of three events concerning Islam in Myanmar held at IAIS Malaysia in 2012. The third event, an international seminar, is scheduled to be held in November this year. The theme chosen for the event is “Myanmar and the ASEAN Community: Defining the Place and Role of the Myanmar Muslim Community.” The focus of this November seminar will depend on the outcome of the present seminar. IAIS Malaysia’s initiative in organizing these events is mainly motivated by its deep concern with issues facing Muslim minorities in the world, particularly in the ASEAN region.

The objectives of the seminar are to promote studies and research on Islam and the Muslim community in Myanmar; to promote better relationships between Myanmar Muslim intellectuals and those of ASEAN; to seek a better understanding of the new political realities

in Myanmar and trends towards liberalization and democratization and their implications for the Myanmar Muslim community; and to generate ideas that would help the Myanmar Muslim community respond effectively to the opportunities and challenges arising from the new political changes in the country.

Dr. Badawi hoped at his officiating speech that the Muslim community in Myanmar will play an active role in this new regional community and not isolate them from Myanmar's moving in the direction of liberalization and democratization and it will be a commendable thing for them to give priorities to issues of education, economic life, and youth development. He emphasized on investment in education and youth development for the sake of a better future and expected that non-resident Myanmar Muslims can help to advance the cause of education in their community at home. Politically, Myanmar is now at a new juncture of their history and Myanmar Muslims should grab the various opportunities in various fields such as economics, education, and so on offered by the new changes taking place in the country. Therefore, Myanmar Muslims should be able to adopt intelligent, wise, and peaceful responses to the changes taking place in their country.

In the morning session, Dr Hussein in his lecture on "Education of Myanmar Muslims in the Age of Globalization: Opportunities and Challenges" claimed that the educational standards of Myanmar Muslim Community is far behind the global levels and the process of globalization is minimal here. From the primary to the tertiary level, Myanmar Muslims need a lot of improvement and need to adopt a cautious approach in utilizing the media and contemporary means and methods, based on Islamic moral values. Ironically, In Myanmar religious leaders still advise the community to pursue purely Islamic studies i.e., Quran and Sunnah. However, the coordination between Islamic studies and modern education is necessary for surviving in the highly competitive global arena. Hence, modification of education system combining both religious and scientific learning are very urgent in order to rise to Asian and global levels.

The second speaker of the first session Mr. Than in his lecture on "Economic, Social and Welfare Position of Myanmar Muslims: Opportunities and Challenges" termed Myanmar as a resource rich country which once famously known as "rice-pot of South-East Asia" though it is now among the poorest countries. In particular, the economic and social position of the Muslims in Myanmar declined massively and poverty, high unemployment rates, homelessness, social dislocation are very common among Muslims. These problems are mostly technical and linked to the growth of country's economy and political development which cannot be solved by Muslims alone. However, the current democratization process is the best moment for the Muslims to participate hand in hand with the rest of the people and engage in the development of Myanmar for the betterment the country.

The final speaker of the day Mr. Shah in his lecture on "The Future of Muslim Youths in Myanmar: Opportunities and Challenges" said that two principal groups of Muslims exist in Myanmar historically i.e., Myanmar Muslims and the Indian Muslims. Besides them, there

are other Muslim groups namely Pantay, Pathi, Rohingya, Kaman, Pashu and others. They are disunited since the British administration and upholding unity and reconciliation among the descendants of the Myanmar Muslim and Indian Muslims is a big challenge of this time. In the past, some great leaders like Sayar Gyi U Nu, U Razak, U Rashid and U Pe Khin, etc. made important contributions in the areas of politics, religious, education, literature, the economy and social activities. Unfortunately, the Muslims in Myanmar are stagnant now in this critical juncture of the current political development and the process of democratization. He expected that unity among the Muslims in Myanmar can be achieved without the assistance of the Government and setting up a Muslims' Affairs ministry or Department who would be solely responsible for affairs of the Muslims can, therefore, play an important role. Moreover, changing the mindset of Muslims is required for further education reform and economic advancement. Finally, the seminar was concluded by Dr. Bakar remarking on "*The Future of Myanmar Muslims in the ASEAN Community*" at sharp 4.30 pm.

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