Jaya: Society has role in checking extremism

By Teo Cheng Wee, Regional Correspondent

KUALA LUMPUR: Society needs to act in unison to fight extremists, especially in a tech-savvy world where radical views and videos can go viral in an instant, Singapore's former senior minister S. Jayakumar said yesterday.

Speaking at a conference here on conflict resolution, he observed that the task of checking extremism cannot be left to the government alone.

Instead, community leaders, non-governmental organisations, the media and individuals must play critical roles in denouncing it and fostering discussions.

'The role of communication and dissemination in cyberspace is extremely important,' he said. 'The minority view, (when left) unchecked, uncorrected and unrebutted over a period of time, gathers a momentum which masks the real sentiments and views of the majority.'

Professor Jayakumar, who is now a professor of law at the National University of Singapore, is among guest speakers at the inaugural Global Movement of the Moderates (GMM), a loose grouping of individuals, organisations and academics that promotes peace and pragmatism.

Singapore has not been untouched by extremist views posted on the Internet, and the authorities in the island nation have arrested a number of people who made inflammatory comments online.

Among those arrested was a member of the youth wing of the People's Action Party - the ruling party in Singapore - who was held late last year for posting offensive pictures on the Internet.

A year earlier, the police had arrested three youths for posting racist comments on social networking site Facebook.

In 2005, three young bloggers were convicted under the Sedition Act of posting inflammatory remarks against Muslims and Malays.

'When unfounded statements based on bigotry, prejudice or mischief are made, before they can unleash a viral spin of similar views of hatred, others who feel strongly that this is wrong ought to jump into the blog or website and put their views across,' said Prof Jayakumar, who also served as foreign minister and deputy prime minister during three decades in politics.

He was one of two Singaporean speakers at the GMM conference, the brainchild of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, which has attracted 350-odd delegates from 70 countries.

On Wednesday, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, spoke on the role of education in promoting moderation.

Moderation, modernization and Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur -- As you might recall, in the past, the Kemalist establishment and its accessory media organizations claimed that Turkey was quickly becoming like Iran or Saudi Arabia because of so-called reactionaryism threats and suggested, instead, that Turkey should be like Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali-led Tunisia.

When their zealous efforts to prevent the 2007 presidential elections were foiled, they changed their tactics and started to argue that "Turkey is becoming like Malaysia" and even employed the sociological concept of "neighborhood pressure" to exert pressure on the public's expectations of democracy. Still, you may recall that the Hürriyet newspaper and its then-Editor-in-Chief Ertuğrul Özkök served as the flagship of this campaign as they have in many instances in the past. At that time I was considerably upset with and preoccupied by the propaganda suggesting that Turkey was becoming like Malaysia -- apart from other countries to which Turkey was likened in these campaigns of psychological warfare. When I arrived in Malaysia to attend a conference, the claims voiced by those groups who had stirred up fears of "becoming like Malaysia" rushed back into my head.

How could they describe Malaysia as a negative role model for Turkey? How could they liken these two countries to each other, despite the fact Turkey and Malaysia are not alike, except for having the same religion and nurturing similar wishes for democratization and economic development? First of all, was Malaysia a country -- as depicted by the Kemalist media -- that would always fail to understand the spirit of the times?

Since Tuesday, I have been in Kuala Lumpur to attend the conference titled "The International Conference on the Global Movement of Moderates -- In Pursuit of an Enduring and Just Peace." From what I have heard, discussed and read, I've understood that the Kemalist oligarchic elites did a great injustice to Malaysia by using this beautiful country in their efforts to create fear in the general public to compensate for their historic political defeat in 2007. Of course I know that "ignorance" cannot explain how a country -- that champions moderation, dialogue, coexistence and pluralism -- came to be marketed as a bad model for Turkey. I can safely assert that the sole reason for this was the ill intention of those groups who lost their unfairly earned privileges with the collapse of the old system in Turkey.

In what ways does the real Malaysia differ from its Kemalist reproduction, which is seen as a source of fear by the Turkish public? What does it mean for Turkey and the world? Malaysia is a country with a population nearing 29 million -- 50.4 percent are Malay, 23.7 percent Chinese, 11 percent indigenous, 7 percent Indian and the remaining 7.8 percent consist of other ethnicities. Malaysia also has a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, pluralist character. A majority 60.4 percent of its populace are Muslim, 19.2 percent Christian, 6.3 percent Hindu. Malaysia is also home to many Taoists, Confucians, Sikhs and practitioners of Chinese traditional religions (2.6 percent) -- all of whom coexist together. It is a country where we can observe mosques, churches, temples and sacred sites for other religions standing side by side. Adopting the slogan of "unity in plurality" and turning this unity into an official policy with the motto "One Malaysia," this country has the conviction that their slogan will play a lead role in the acceptance of diversity as a source of greater unity. Muslim leaders of the country hold that in Malaysia, Islam is synonymous with moderation, inclusiveness and good governance. Malaysia is a country that has managed to give peace and stability to its inhabitants by achieving modernization and moderation synchronously after it became independent in 1957.

During this brief period spanning some 50 years, Malaysia has made extensive progress in transitioning from a low-income agrarian society with an agricultural economy to a modern industrial society with high/medium income levels. In Malaysia, where 72 percent of the population lives in cities, the average per capita income is $14,700 and the average growth rate is 7 percent. The country has managed to become a $414 billion economy in terms of purchasing power and a $238 billion economy according to official figures. In contrast to the recent debates in Turkey about producing a local car, Malaysia has two national cars, the Proton and the Perodua. With a modern economy -- 90 percent of which relies on the industrial and services sectors -- Malaysia is truly an Asian tiger. The country allocates 4.1 percent of its GDP to education, so we can conclude that it will keep up its momentum.

To official authorities, Islam is a way of life in Malaysia. The Malaysian government advocates a path of Wasatiyah, or justly balanced moderation, in formulating and executing domestic policies and in conducting international relations. The current government has embraced the guiding philosophy of "One Malaysia," and Malaysia has decided on a policy of integration, as opposed to assimilation, as its guiding principle for managing plurality. Malaysians accept their diversity; they do not merely tolerate each other but they also embrace and celebrate their differences. While raising its voice against injustice around the world, such as the Palestinian cause for independence, Malaysia does not support violence against non-combatants, civilians, women or children. "Some argue that desperation has led to unorthodox methods of warfare. I would urge them to heed to principle of Islam that the ends never justify the means," says current Malaysian prime-minister Najib Tun Razak. Proceeding from this outlook, Malaysia is embarking on a campaign to promote modernization instead of extremism and negotiation instead of confrontation, following the example of contemporary role models like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi under the guidance of our esteemed Hz. Mohammad and other prophets.

Preserving Islam and nurturing the strongest Islamic banking system, applying its religious outlook to its economy, Malaysia is taking a lead in restoring Islamic bonds and sukuk, with over 60 percent of the outstanding sukuk in the world originating from Malaysia. In other words, with its social life, education, economy and environmental awareness, Malaysia stands out as an exemplary country, not one that can be denigrated as a bad model. As the notable academic Kishore Mahbubani noted during the conference, moderation is growing in the world in parallel to the rising middle class that seeks alternatives to war and instability. As technological developments turn the world into a global village where everyone can know each other, the potential for otherifying and demonizing other people is diminishing. At a time when moderation is on the rise, countries that

make moderation their official policy, like Malaysia, will get the upper hand.

Despite the foregoing, of course, it is hard to say that Malaysia has overcome all of its problems. I must note that minorities in Malaysia are expressing their discontent over the government's tendency to select Muslims over non-Muslims for government jobs and minorities are still disadvantaged in commerce, education and social life. As a country that enjoys increased freedom of thought, with the abolition of media censorship, I believe Malaysia will quickly overcome this problem within the framework of moderation, pluralism and respect for diversity.