

## “NURTURING A GLOBAL CULTURE OF RESPECT AND TOLERANCE”

By : Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

The distasteful cartoon of Prophet Muhammad, first published in Denmark in September 2005 and subsequently reproduced in other media, continues to spark a chain of reactions ranging from peaceful protest to violence in many Muslim communities.

The international community must work together to put out this fire. A good start would be to stop justifying the cartoon as “freedom of the press”, which only hardens the Muslim community’s response. Another vital step would be to discontinue its reproduction, which only prolongs the outrage.

To non-Muslims, the image of Prophet Muhammad may only be of casual interest. But to Muslim communities worldwide, it is of enormous spiritual importance. For the last fourteen centuries, Muslims have adhered to a strict code that prohibits any visual portrait of the Prophet. When this code was violated and their Prophet mocked for the purpose of humor, Muslims feel a direct assault on their faith.

Reprinting the cartoon in order to make a point of “free speech” is an act of senseless brinkmanship. It is also a disservice to democracy. It sends a conflicting message to the Muslim community: that in a democracy, it is permissible to offend Islam. This message hurts advocacy efforts at proving that democracy and Islam go together. The average Muslim who prays five times a day needs to be convinced that the democracy he is embracing, and expected to defend, is also protective and respectful of Islam’s sacred symbols. Otherwise, democracy will not be of much interest to him.

The cartoon crisis serves as a reminder of all hell that may break loose in a world of intolerance and ignorance.

The global community needs to cultivate democracies of freedom and tolerance—not democracies of freedom versus tolerance. It is tolerance that protects freedom, harnesses diversity, strengthens peace and delivers progress.

Since the September 11th terror attacks, many in the Western world has shown increasing interest in the Islamic world. Yet, this has not been matched by a greater knowledge and understanding of Islam. In December last year, the Summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Mecca lamented “the feelings of stigmatization and concern over the growing phenomenon of Islamophobia around the world as a form of racism and discrimination”.

The West and Islam need not collide in a “clash of civilizations”. Many Islamic

communities comfortably embrace some “Western” habits. Correspondingly, Islam has become the fastest growing religion in some Western nations, including the United States. The Western and Islamic worlds can conscientiously work together to nurture a global culture of respect and tolerance.

The international community must not come out of the cartoon crisis broken and divided. We need to build more bridges between religions, civilizations and cultures. Government leaders, religious figures and common citizens can go beyond supporting religious freedom—they can express solidarity with those who are defending the integrity of their faith. We also need to intensify inter-faith dialogue so that we may further tear down the walls of misunderstanding and mistrust—an undertaking that Indonesia has actively promoted.

Muslims worldwide also have responsibilities. No one—certainly not Muslims—will be better off if the current crisis descends into open conflict and more bloodshed. The best way for Muslims to fight intolerance and ignorance toward Islam is by tirelessly reaching out to non-Muslims and projecting Islam as a peaceful religion. We also need to be forgiving to those who have sincerely apologized for offending Islam.

Indeed, at this difficult hour, Muslims may emulate Prophet Muhammad’s well-known qualities in dealing with adversity: composure, sound judgment, magnanimity, and benevolence.

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