

Peaceful coexistence not enough

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KOTA KINABALU: Sabah’s long-standing reputation as one of Malaysia’s strongest examples of religious and ethnic harmony should not obscure the need to address persistent inequalities that continue to undermine human dignity, according to University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Centre for Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning Associate Prof Dr Suraya Sintang.

Speaking at the Roundtable Discussion on Multi-faith Partnership, she said while Sabah has demonstrated that people of different faiths and ethnicities can live peacefully together, true human flourishing requires more than symbolic displays of unity.

Instead, she called for Sabah to move towards what she described as “substantive harmony”—a society where every individual, including those who remain socially and economically marginalised, has fair access to opportunities, basic services and protection of their dignity.

“To flourish human dignity, Sabah must move from symbolic harmony to substantive harmony,” she said on Tuesday. She acknowledged that Sabah has become a recognised model of religious harmony because interactions across different communities occur naturally in everyday life.

Unlike formal interfaith programmes, Sabahans regularly meet and build friendships across religious and ethnic boundaries in villages, workplaces, schools, markets and family gatherings.

Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and followers of indigenous beliefs routinely attend one another’s weddings, funerals, harvest festivals and community celebrations, demonstrating mutual respect while remaining faithful to their own religious traditions.

The prevalence of mixed-faith extended families also demonstrates that strong religious commitment and deep family affection are not mutually exclusive.

Suraya emphasised that these everyday interactions have helped reduce prejudice because people come to know one another personally rather than through religious labels.

However, she cautioned that peaceful coexistence alone does not guarantee that every member of society experiences dignity equally.

She said one of Sabah’s greatest challenges is the gap between its public image as a harmonious society and the lived reality of many communities.

While harmony is often highlighted through official speeches, cultural celebrations and public events, she noted that many Sabahans continue to struggle with poverty, discrimination and unequal access to education, healthcare and employment.

“A society cannot fully protect human dignity when certain groups are left behind,” she stressed.

She added that exclusion from basic services diminishes human dignity even when society appears peaceful on the surface.

Citing Sabah’s socio-economic challenges, she pointed out that many rural communities continue to face inadequate roads, unreliable water supply, limited internet connectivity, and shortages of schools and healthcare facilities.

These structural inequalities, she said, reduce people’s ability to improve their quality of life and contradict the principle that every individual deserves equal opportunities regardless of where they live.

“Human dignity requires fair access to basic services, regardless of where a person lives,” she said.

While inter-religious relationships remain strong at the community level, Suraya said meaningful dialogue on sensitive issues still needs to be strengthened.

Although communities regularly celebrate one another’s festivals and maintain cordial relationships, discussions surrounding religious misunderstandings, discrimination and unequal treatment are often avoided.

She warned that without safe and respectful dialogue, underlying tensions may remain unresolved despite outward harmony.

Suraya also highlighted the continuing challenges faced by undocumented and stateless children and families in Sabah. Without proper identification documents, many are unable to enroll in schools, access healthcare or obtain legal employment.

Regardless of their legal status, she argued every individual deserves compassion, dignity and protection of their basic rights.

Despite these challenges, Suraya maintained that Sabah’s tradition of living peacefully across religious and ethnic differences remains one of its greatest strengths.

She said this culture of coexistence provides a strong foundation, but it must be reinforced through equitable public policies, inclusive institutions, honest dialogue and sustained community action.

Rather than viewing these shortcomings as weaknesses, recognising them provides an opportunity to strengthen the Sabah model.

“Sabah’s harmony is real but it is not perfect. Acknowledging the gaps does not weaken the Sabah model. Instead, it helps us improve it,” she added.

She concluded that a truly flourishing society is one where harmony extends beyond symbolic coexistence to ensure that every person is heard, protected, respected and given a meaningful opportunity to thrive.

“Human dignity will flourish when every person is not only accepted, but also heard, protected, respected, and given a fair opportunity to live a meaningful life,” she said.