THE INTERVIEW

Singapore is not yet truly multicultural

Muhammad, instrumental in the 1940 founding of the Inter-Religious Organisation, are active in interfaith matters. Thankfully, the “harming” set of interfaith interactions that he first encountered in the early 1990s has blossomed.

“IT IS IMPORTANT to remember that the majority of our Muslim brothers and sisters don’t know much about the Islamic community and culture, and Islam,” he says.

In the West, he observes, university classes in Islamic culture and civilisation are popular with non-Muslims, as are Arabic, Persian or Turkish languages. Prof Alatas also does not believe that Singapore is intrinsically multicultural.

When you are rooted in civilisation and the great traditions of Islam, including Sufism which is by nature open and pluralistic, you can’t be influenced by external fads.

Extremism is tougher to uproot today, however. While Muslims have always rejected extremist ideology, today it is harder to confine because of a greater number of factors, including oil wealth and support from superpowers like the British who supported the Wahhabi alliance between the wars, he says.

Wahhabism is the dominant sect in Saudi Arabia. It was founded by Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab (1703-1792), who allied with the House of Saud.

Prof Alatas is not pessimistic, but he does perceive that extremism has become more difficult to deal with in modern times.

Within South-East Asia, he believes that a knowledge of great men of the region can build a fuller diversity in dialogue.

Students say little about the region, including Filipino thinker Jose Rizal, “probably the most creative South-East Asia has produced”, he says. “In our own way to be global, we keep the region.”

In the unifying spirit of Hari Raya Hal, he says: "We want to be truly cosmopolitan.