

# INVESTMENT, ISA AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Dr. Tan: You have served as Minister of Trade and Industry and have been successful in attracting foreign investors to this country. You have even set up a "one stop agency" to smoothen and hasten things for investors.

But are you aware of the delays, frustrations and even corruption that cause many businessmen to tear their hair with rage? How do you propose to rectify this state of affairs?

Dr Mahathir: Well the only thing I can say is that you are exaggerating things quite a bit. Most businessmen in this country do not feel that frustrated.

They would be even more frustrated in other countries and I can name a few where things take five or six years before anything gets done but in this country they are done, may not be as quickly as the businessmen want them but are done and I don't think they tear their hair with rage.

But we are doing everything possible to rectify the situation. I mean when I was there, I set up this "one stop agency" and now we are trying to curb corruption, we are trying to make the Government more efficient not only for the businessmen's need but also

wouldn't say in Singapore. Quite a lot of so-called developed countries are slower than us. You try to go to Italy and try and do something there.

Dr Tan: I would say it but I won't dare to point it.

Dr Mahathir: I won't dare to point it also. I can name quite a few where it is most frustrating even for us to go and see.

Dr Tan: No, but I think if this "one stop agency," if it really is a "one stop agency," it should give prompt replies.

Dr Mahathir: It is not possible for me to put all the most senior officials there. Invariably the official will be middle rung ones who would have to consult senior officials because if I were to put senior officials there they will be doing nothing.

Then of course, we are wasting a lot of efforts but if I allow them to do something else then they won't be attending to these people.

## LOW EBB

So to find the correct level of officers is a very difficult problem but nevertheless having them located in one single location has improved the image.

Dr Tan: It's an improvement I agree, but it does not solve the problem of the businessmen.

Dr Mahathir: I don't

businessmen here are not responsible for what is being done by the Thatcher Government. I would say that the Government in this country would do well to reappraise our foreign relations and not drop the old and trusted ones as I mentioned in my question.

Dr Mahathir: Yes, but that is your view, it is not a question.

Dr. Tan: Are you aware that many of our old friends abroad are a little jittery about the way their relationship with this country have cooled since you took over?

Dr Mahathir: If they are jittery about it, they can do something about it. They know the reasons for the relationship with this country being cooled. So if they feel that is a bad thing, to have bad relationship, I think they should do something about it. They can't wait for us to do it.

Dr. Tan: The Alliance Government enacted the Internal Security Act. This was followed by the Barisan Nasional Government passing the Essential (Security Cases) Regulations Act. This has greatly restricted fundamental liberties in this country. You maintain that these laws are necessary to curb terrorism in this country but as you are aware repressive laws have not ever achieved that objective in other countries?

Granted that there must

was that the gunmen had in their possession a gun.

Dr Mahathir: But the law says quite distinctly that possession of a gun is punishable by the death penalty, so they are not innocent in so far as the law is concerned. The law may be harsh I would agree with you.

Dr. Tan: I am asking for the removal of some of the more abnoxious provisions of the law, I am not asking for the removal of the law although as a Human Right activist I would like to see both these sets of law removed.

And I have spoken about this as you know in Parliament. I am not speaking to you in the privacy of this room but my view on this are known. What I am saying is that lots of people now in Death Row. (I am told there are 31 of them) and I am sure not all of them have been caught with possession of arms with the intention of shooting down anybody, but perhaps with the mistaken idea of frightening somebody or some of them may be asked to carry a parcel and got caught with it.

Dr Mahathir: The courts take full account of all the circumstances and even then when the court has found all these people guilty and sentenced them to be hanged, the Pardon's Board

so whereas there are lots of cases where perhaps a life imprisonment may be a more humane and appropriate sentence.

Dr Mahathir: Well, there is the Pardon's Board.

Dr. Tan: As I said, I only know of one case.

Dr Mahathir: There are more than one case, I can assure you!

Dr. Tan: There is a genuine fear among non-Muslims of all religious in this country that religious freedom in our country is slowly but surely and deliberately being curtailed e.g.:-

- the ban on the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia — now partially lifted;
- restrictions on the building of non-Muslim places of worship;
- detention of a shipment of the Bible in Bahasa Indonesia by the Special Branch, since then this shipment has been released.

## ALKITAB

Can you assure the non-Muslims of Malaysia that the Barisan Nasional Government will guarantee freedom of worship and that includes the right to buy, sell and use of the Alkitab in Bahasa Malaysia, and the alienation of land to the non-Muslims to build their own places of worship?

Dr Mahathir: There is certainly no intention to

for everybody else.

This we are doing all the time. But if you have any specific idea, I am willing to learn.

Dr. Tan: I tell you what it's true, what you say, if you look at some of our neighbours, they are worse than what we are, but unfortunately we are comparing with our nearest neighbour and I was talking about this the other day to a very good businessman.

He told me "Doctor, what is happening in this country? You go to our nearest neighbour, I tell them about my project: these are the things I need and they look at my plans and ask me all sorts of questions, then they say 'you come back within a fortnight.' If they have anything they want to clear up they ring me up and I give them the reply. Within a fortnight everything is done for me. Here after six months things are still not moving."

Dr. Mahathir: Again, I say that it's not bad considering that we have 13 different states to deal with, land matters are under state control and then we have the different authorities which are necessary.

You can't do away with that but despite all this, we are able to process the application much faster than most of the countries.

Dr. Tan: If I may say so, that is no consolation to say we are faster. If we are faster than some of the African countries then we are nowhere.

Dr. Mahathir: No, I

guarantee to solve all their problems.

Dr. Tan: Now that you have directed us to look East does it mean that we will be dropping some of our old and trusted friends in the next quarter of a century and recultivate new ones in the East?

Our relations, especially in trade, with the United Kingdom are at a low ebb but do you think that Japan or Korea can come to our aid the way that Great Britain did during Confrontation should the need arise?

Dr. Mahathir: We really can't tell, I doubt whether Britain would come to our aid if we have a confrontation now.

Dr. Tan: The circumstances are entirely different now. They would say they will think twice about supporting us. At that time, although we were independent, we had a defence treaty with them, but now we don't have that treaty.

Dr. Mahathir: So relationship between countries depends upon circumstances. Somebody may be your enemy one day and your friends the next day. Similarly somebody may be very willing to help you at one time but may not be willing at other time and instead of them there may be other people willing to help you.

Our policy is of course to be as friendly as possible to everybody but when people are not friendly towards us, it's very difficult for us to react in a very friendly way with them.

Dr. Tan: The poor

be some erosion of Human Rights in a situation such as ours where we are faced with internal insurrection on a small scale. Will you consider amending some of the more abnoxious provisions in both these two sets of laws?

Dr. Mahathir: In the first place I would contest the description "insurrection on a small scale. People are still dying and today if you read the report, one police sergeant was shot dead at the border. In order to make sure that people who are very free with the use of guns are suitably punished, we have to enact this law and the only way we can modify the law, and the only occasion is when we find people are less trigger happy.

This law was in fact enacted, I remember very distinctly, when Tun Razak was still Prime Minister and it was because some gunmen very freely shot some jewellery shop salesmen and the like.

That is why it was enacted. It was not enacted because we feel we should hang people but because of the thing happening first. It was our reaction to that. Now, for us to modify, we must have something happening to show that people are less gun happy.

Dr. Tan: But as you know in the process of enforcing the law, I am convinced, lots of innocent people have been hanged despite our independent and fair judiciary because all that needed to be proved

was not allowed the hanging to be carried out. A number of them have had their sentence commuted.

## GUILT

Dr. Tan: Off hand I can only think of one case of the young boy in Penang.

Dr. Mahathir: That's the only one that you can record but I can tell you that there were a number of people who were sentenced but their sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment.

Dr. Tan: Their sentences have been commuted to life imprisonment. It would help the Government a great deal, if I may say so that this news about these people is published to show that the law, although harsh, is not demanding an eye for an eye.

Dr. Mahathir: But of course as far as the courts are concerned they are satisfied of guilt and they have sentenced according to the law but the law also provides that all death sentences must be reviewed and during the review by the Pardon's Board, people have had their sentence commuted to life imprisonment.

Dr. Tan: The sort of thing that I hope the Government would want to review is this question of mandatory death sentence. That leaves the court no alternative. The court if it finds the accused guilty and the death sentence is the only thing that it can pronounce and they have to do

curb freedom of worship in this country. Now the publication of the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia has created a little bit of uneasiness among Muslims because they feel that this is an attempt to try and convert Muslims.

Now we as the Government have to tell them that this is not so but it is up to the people who are using the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia to confine it to Christians or to other non-Muslims. If you try to disseminate it among Muslims then you are going to create problems because the law provides that no non-Muslim missionary may carry out the activities among Muslims.

That is the law. That is why there is the fear about the Alkitab. Now we have allowed the Bible in Bahasa Indonesia to come in. It is the duty of the people concerned to see that these do not get into the hands of Muslims or that there is no deliberate attempt made to try and teach Muslims the contents of the Bible because that would be wrong according to our present constitution.

That is why this thing has happened, not so much to suppress Christianity as to protect Muslims.

Dr. Tan: Well, I fully support your view. Have you not seen the changed circumstances of this country, because of the success of the drive of the government in propagating Bahasa Malaysia. The present and future generations are only conversant in Bahasa

Malaysia so how do we communicate with them? You can't communicate with them in English, you can't communicate with them in Mandarin or Tamil so we have to use the language they understand.

Dr Mahathir: I know but this problem is not just because the Bible is in Bahasa Malaysia. Advertisements with regards to liquor in Bahasa Malaysia has been objected to by Malays, by Muslims because they say this is trying to propagate the use of liquor among Malays. We are facing a problem here.

Dr. Tan: I would support that.

Dr Mahathir: You would support that but a lot of people say the people in this country speak Bahasa Malaysia, how do we communicate? How do we advertise? You see, and this is a dilemma for the Government. You must understand that.

Dr. Tan: I agree, but you see generally in this country, the non-Muslims of whatever religion have accepted what is in the Constitution of Malaysia, that there is a "Cordon Sanitaire" round the Muslims and they would not try to propagate their religion among the Muslims, except you know, in every society, you have some cranks.

It's for the Government to deal with these people. The difficulty of the non-Muslims particularly the Christians, is that you can only communicate with the present and the future generation in Bahasa Malaysia. Hence this use of the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia. If we cannot import, if we cannot buy and sell them what will happen? You see, this ban was lifted only partially.

## RESTRICTION

They can use them, that's all in the gazette notification. They still cannot buy and sell them. If you cannot buy and sell, how can you say it is not a restriction on religious freedom?

Dr Mahathir: Because we have to have some form of control but what you are saying is that is a restriction on you. It is not because of trying to stop the religious freedom in this country.

Dr. Tan: If I cannot buy and sell the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia then it is a restriction.

Dr Mahathir: But certainly there are other mechanisms by which you can distribute the Bible. The church can do that for example.

Dr. Tan: But you cannot. The ban says very clearly that you cannot buy and sell.

Dr Mahathir: But if it is done by certified bodies I think it would be legal.

Dr. Tan: No, I have gone over again and consulted our lawyers. I do hope you will look into that.

Dr Mahathir: I will look into that.

Dr. Tan: Because this concerns the church very seriously. If the church cannot buy and sell then what can we do. How can we preach the word.

Dr Mahathir: Well, we can look into that but as to restrictions on building of non-Muslims places of worship, this is not true. But we have to have some control over the building of the places of worship simply because as you know in Hinduism for example you find a big tree, you begin with a small altar there, before you know there is a big temple in somebody's compound. This is our problem.

Dr. Tan: I agree with you, but you know, ever since Shah Alam was built, no other religious body has been able to get a piece of land there to build a place of worship except the Muslims.

Dr Mahathir: I don't know about Shah Alam, but I know in Petaling Jaya, for example, there are so many new churches and Siamese temples as well.

Dr. Tan: P.J., as you know, was founded in Templer's time. At that time there was no restrictions whatsoever. Now in Shah Alam, they won't say they won't give land but they are considering, they are still considering and they are like this. The other thing is

Dr Mahathir: But certainly that is not the Federal Government's policy nor the nation's policy.

Dr. Tan: From time to time you have conferences with the MBs and we hope that you will pass the word around that they should approve application for land. Shah Alam is a good example. Don't ask me to look at the mosques coming up. We have applied for this land even before Shah Alam came up but we still can't get land.

I give you another example. In Subang Jaya, there was a land that was allocated by the developer for a church. The moment the State Government found it out, they took over the land. So, you see, does that tell us that there is restriction or not on religion?

Dr Mahathir: We can look into that.

Dr. Tan: And this detention of the Bible that I have mentioned before. Since then they have been released. Although the shipment has been released it caused a great deal of uneasiness among the Christians.

Dr Mahathir: I know, but this is not Government

policy. At times the hands and feet of the Government, the people who are working on the ground, they just react to a situation without thinking. But when the

Government gets to know about it, we can take action. This is in fact what we did.

Dr. Tan: I do hope this will be published, I do hope the relevant officers will take note. It does create lots of uneasiness.

Bible being classified as subversive material, that created a great deal of uneasiness. Would you like to reply further to this question of religious freedom?

Dr Mahathir: Well, I have already assured you that religious freedom will be upheld.

Dr. Tan: Now, one final question. You and I have been actors in the first 25 years of our Merdeka and it is not likely that both of us will be around when we celebrate our Golden Jubilee, 25 years hence. So for the benefit of future generations can you look at the crystal ball and let us know what you see in store for us in the next 25 years?

Dr Mahathir: Well, I see great things for this country as the continuation of political stability and rapid development. I see a much

more cohesive society and I think the imbalances that we find now would be diminished very very greatly and I think we will be well on the way to building a united and greater Malaysia.

Dr. Tan: Do you see by the time we celebrate our Golden Jubilee, the restrictions based on race will be removed?

Dr Mahathir: I should hope so, but we would not be able to say what the future generation would say. But if the present measures being taken to reduce imbalances are successful by then I should think that the most of .....

Dr. Tan: For example, One of the most divisive forces in this country is entrance to our universities which is not based on merit at this moment. You see, that will be removed and be based on merit by the time we celebrate our Golden Jubilee?

Dr Mahathir: Well, provided the progress made now is being maintained and the disparities are removed, I think it is possible this restriction or quota will be done away or reduced at least.