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Mahathir-chair

MALAYS HAVE COME A LONG WAY FROM BEING HEWERS OF WOOD

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

WELLINGTON, March 27 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Malays have undergone a remarkable change since Malaysia became independent and academics who conduct a study of the race will find it intriguing.

They would have the opportunity to observe the dynamic evolution of a people who would have a considerable role in the future of Malaysia, if not the Malay world and the western rim of the Pacific.

In a thought-provoking speech when inaugurating the Chair of Malay Studies at Victoria University here, Dr Mahathir spoke of Malaysia's achievements and the role played by Malays in their attainment.

He said whether Malaysia's attainment of developed nation status would be short-lived or not would depend very much on the ability to sustain the moral and cultural values of the people of Malaysia.

As the Malays make up the majority, it would largely be them who would determine the permanency of the Malaysian achievement.

Dr Mahathir said that under British rule, the Malays were preserved as 'Nature's Gentlemen'.

'They were a contented people who accepted British rule as a matter of course. And if the British decided that they should remain the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, why, what was wrong with that?

'Had they not always been the hewers of wood and drawers of water? And so the end of World War II found them actually welcoming the return of British colonial rule.'

Then suddenly there was a change when the Malays, uncharacteristically, objected to a British plan for a union of the Malay states.

'Nature's gentlemen' began to behave in a rather ungentlemanly manner -- protesting, demonstrating and forming a 'national' political party which ignored loyalty to their own states.

'With amazing swiftness, their character and creed changed. They even learnt to boo at the British Parliamentarians who came to investigate what was happening in the Malay states then,' Dr Mahathir said.

The process of cultural change of the Malays which began then had not stopped and in fact appeared to be accelerating.

'Where they once politely and deprecatingly decline nomination to lead political parties because they felt unqualified, they now campaign, blatantly and vociferously, proclaiming their own personal virtues and qualifications,' he said.

The Prime Minister also spoke at length on the New Economic Policy (NEP), taking to task its detractors.

He said that when the NEP, an affirmative action programme to bring the Malays and indigenous people into the mainstream economic activity, wadrets e Western media.

The NEP was condemned as racist lthough th Chinese de offence and in fact c operated in its process.

Dr Mahathir said that after 20 years of the NEP, Malaysia was much more balanced economically and stable politically while race relations had improved.

Unable to stir up racial animosity by exploiting the NEP, the foreign media and others now condemn the programme because, according to them, it had made a few Malays wealthy -- Malays who are said to be friends of the ruling UMNO leaders.

'It is absolutely true that these Malays are close to government leaders but then the Malaysian government is close to all businessmen of all races, some of whom are successful,' the Prime Minister said.

'They were usually not close before they succeeded. They became close after they showed their abilities in business.

'And many Malays who are friends and colleagues of the Malay ministers are today as poor as ever.

'It is not being close that counts. It is the ability to succeed in business.'

Dr Mahathir said the beneficiaries of the NEP were not only the millionaires and billionaires but also hundreds of thousands of indigenous people through special training, loan schemes, licences, contracts and guidance by ministries.

'To denigrate the NEP as benefitting only a few friends of the Prime Minister is to be deliberately untruthful and cynical,' he said, pointing out that no social engineering programme can result in everyone becoming multi-millionaires.

Dr Mahathir said that people often talked about the equality of races and that colour should not differentiate human beings.

But the fact remained that many people associated colour with intellectual and other attributes.

'Thus the remarkable achievement of Southeast Asia is attributed to the overseas Chinese. The brown Malays who are indigenous to Southeast Asia are dismissed as quite irrelevant to the progress and achievements of ASEAN,' he said.

'The prejudice is very much there,' he said.

With the end of the Cold War, the USSR ceased to be the enemy and a new enemy was necessary to prop up the nationalist ego, to be the new villain in new novels and films.

'And the new enemy is Islam and the Muslims. They are shifty, unprincipled, given to violence and terror and generally incapable of governing themselves and developing their countries,' he said.

'The Malays are Muslims and must therefore be included in this new substitute bogey.

Accordingly, in articles and reports in the media, this was how the Malays are portrayed.

'In fact someone once described them in a derogatory sense as +jungle Arabs+ as opposed to the desert Arabs.'

But Malaysia today is a peaceful and secure nation which has been developing at an average growth rate of 6.7 percent since independence and 8 percent over the last eight years.

Its per capita income had risen from US\$300 at independence to US\$4,000 today and from being solely dependent on tin and rubber exports, its export now comprised 78 percent manufactured goods.

'Yet Malaysia is largely a Malay country, governed by a Malay Muslim majority. How is it that the usual things said about Muslims and Malays seem not to be happening in Malaysia?' asked the Prime Minister.

'...is it not possible that the brown Muslim Malays have something to do with it?'-- Bernama

SJ YBY