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A diplomatic education at the UN

Datuk Abdullah Ahmad

THE proactive, high profile, independent and assertive Malaysian foreign policy formulated, directed and articulated by its leading strategist, Dr. Mahathir, has brought Malaysia close to the Third World, to the Islamic and Arab countries and enhanced its Islamic credentials because of its unequivocal and consistent stance on the Palestinian right to self-determination.

Malaysia has also been very vocal at the UN and at conferences it organises on other subjects such as Antarctica, drugs, disarmament, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Vietnam, Kampuchea, Namibia, South Africa, Group 77, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and decolonisation.

If one studied the voting record and the physical behaviour of Malaysia at the UN, one would have noticed that it had shifted drastically from being essentially pro-West throughout Tengku's premiership to first, a policy of "neutral realism" under Tun Razak which culminated with his visit to China in Spring 1974.

Malaysia and China opened to each other, and with that historic step taken twenty two years ago, many things have become possible, the benefits - political as well as economic - of which we are now enjoying.

Dr. Mahathir is the most radical, unafraid and visionary of all Malaysian leaders in 39 years of independence. His tough stand against expanding Zionism, the "double standards" of the super powers, a manipulative and biased western media, the unfair interpretation of multilateral trade rules, and the UN, (the Security Council in particular) and the "blunt instrument of foreign policy of the permanent members" did displease, and have incurred certain costs to Malaysia and Dr. Mahathir personally. However both - the country and Dr. Mahathir - have absorbed them.

The only major test of Malaysian foreign policy thus far was the life-and-death struggle with Sukarno's Indonesia for the sympathy and support of the UN.

The UN did not only bless the birth of Malaysia in 1963, its members elected Malaysia to the Security Council for one year, an achievement which so angered Sukarno that he pulled Indonesia out of the UN. His successor, Suharto, restored the Indonesian membership in 1966. The UN did Malaysia a great honour; and Malaysian diplomats, have performed a remarkable job under trying circumstances, burdened by a lack of resources, funds and personnel.

Malaysia has three big tasks at the UN:

* To prove that the Malaysian presidency of the UN General Assembly is proactive, innovative and productive. Razali, has made the president's job more than just a figurehead. When he leaves office in September next year, he have obtained for his successor more power to perform the job more effectively.

* Razali would have brought about, through his influence and moral force on the chairmen of the five working committees, whose work he oversees, the restructuring of the UN, especially the enlargement of the Security Council, to conclusion. At least, the reforms on budget would have been adopted, and the next president would have a decent office, sufficient funds, proper supporting staff and aides.

* Malaysia must win a non-permanent seat in the Security Council for the 1999-2000 term to help the UN enter the new millennium with confidence and

new vigour.

None of these can and will succeed unless Malaysia is supported by two-thirds of the UN's 185-member countries. If each fails, at least, the UN General Assembly under the Malaysian Presidency will have become less remote and more democratic because of Razali's personal proactive approach and interaction with his peers which has won him and Malaysia many friends.

Razali and other Malaysian diplomats at the UN are of exceptional talent. They have emerged remarkably well. During the Indonesian confrontation, labouring under unfavourable conditions, they achieved a lot due to their special brand of Malaysian diplomacy. For all its weakness and handicaps, Malaysian foreign policy has always been flexible.

Malaysian diplomats are small in number. There are only about 300, and they are the country's first line of defence; always ready to speak out and defend the country's policies against friend and foe alike.

Malaysian foreign policy has succeeded because it has always been pragmatic and adaptable: always responsive to changing situations. Tun Razak and Dr. Mahathir, in particular, have laid strong foundation on which their successors could build.

If Malaysian diplomats had been less modest and the Malaysian public more aware of their accomplishments and achievements in international relations and diplomacy, they might have not remained relatively unknown until the election of Razali as President of the UN General Assembly.

Malaysia, has in less than 40 years, produced several excellent diplomats, such as the late Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil, Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin, R. Ramani, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Tan Sri Zainal Sulong, Tan Sri Zakariah Ali, Tan Sri Zain Azraai, Datuk Peter Lai, Tan Sri Kamil Jaafar and Razali himself. At least four among them are comparable to any of the best in the world. In any event all would have succeeded anywhere.

On the negative side, Wisma Putra planners are not entirely blameless. The Ministry has really no long-term blue-print for the training of our diplomats; no plan for active participation at the UN or elsewhere for the next two or three decades.

I have always marvelled at how Malaysian foreign policy has managed to achieve this much, considering that Wisma Putra has no long-term view, practically nothing substantial beyond, as one "internal critic" claimed, than reacting to developing and escalating events.

As a result of this "ad hoc syndrome", Malaysia lost out to Indonesia on the archipelagic politics and Tun Mohamad Sufian - about the best Malaysian candidate ever- failed to win a seat on the International Court of Justice in 1981.

In any event, as Dr. Mahathir once stated, "diplomacy is much more effective if you have the whereithal to deliver..." and because Malaysia did and continues to have limited resources, the country's diplomatic initiatives and interventions at the UN, either individually or as a group, have likewise achieved limited successes.

Malaysia's membership and active participation at the UN has and will remain an integral part of its foreign policy nest to Asean, OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conferences), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Commonwealth, and South and South. "The UN", as Dr. Mahathir, has rightly said "has not always been a failure." It has helped countries gain freedom, and Malaysia too won freedom because of the moral suasion of the UN.

The UN is and will remain the best training ground for Malaysian diplomats, now and in the future, to hone the diplomatic skills which they will need to defend in many tongues with ease, confidence and verve, the Merdeka that the UN helped us achieve in 1957.

All Wisma Putra chiefs, except one (Ghazali Shafie) has, at one time or another, served at the UN. And this says a lot for the UN as a training centre. Indeed, it is the best university for Malaysian diplomats.

Dr. Mahathir has summed up well our involvement at the UN during his eighth address to the United Nations General Assembly on 27 September. I would like to think that Tan Sri Razali's election as President of the General Assembly has to do with Malaysia's effort and involvement with the UN and globally.

Within three years of Malaysia's independence, we were involved in UN peace-keeping operations in the Congo. Today in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Malaysia is perhaps the only developing country participating in the Nato-led peace-keeping forces, paying in full the cost of our involvement, Malaysia will continue to participate in international activities, UN sponsored or otherwise, combining altruism with enlightened self-interest".

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