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A man brave enough to believe in freedom of speech

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HARVARD: WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad speaks people listen. They may not agree with what he has to say but they nevertheless pay attention to him.

Dr Mahathir is also being inundated with unsolicited advice from a cross section of foreigners. Some want him to resign, others urge him to solicit advice from President Carlos Menem of Argentina.

No matter what and how people - both Malaysian and foreign - view Dr Mahathir, he has been able to bring the problems faced by developing countries to the attention of the international community.

The international community may not agree with what he has to say but they listen and in some instances react immediately, while in other cases action is taken indirectly to resolve the issues that the Prime Minister has highlighted.

The most recent is the currency crisis in South-East Asia. It has prompted the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to study the introduction of new regulations on currency trading.

Some people claim that each time the Prime Minister speaks up on the currency issue the ringgit depreciates. This is a curious phenomenon and a repeat of the early 1980s when Malaysia was a major producer and exporter of tin and natural rubber and its economy was not as diversified as today. It was a major voice in both the International Natural Rubber Agreement (INRA) and the International Tin Agreement (ITA).

Each time the Government (and the then Primary Industries Minister Datuk Paul Leong Khee Seong) made any statement regarding natural rubber or tin, the price would move down. The prices moved down even when the statements regarding government action ought to have provided added confidence to the two industries.

It was therefore clear that the price fluctuations and the related downward trend were not due to fundamentals nor were they related to pure economics, but due to "the invisible hand" - not Adam Smith's invisible hand but larger, more real human ones interfering from external sources to prove a point.

They did prove a point. They proved that producers of primary commodities did not have control over the pricing of their own goods, unlike as the producers of manufactured goods. Leong did not shut up and the Government implemented measures to strengthen the two industries as well as diversify. Malaysia has made tremendous progress since then.

The same phenomenon appears to be repeating itself now with the currencies. Could it be the "invisible human hand" at work again which moves each time Dr Mahathir speaks to prove a point?

A number of other leaders from developing countries agree with what Dr Mahathir has to say but they are not prepared to speak up for fear of being criticised or for fear of retaliation from the developed countries and the more powerful forces in the west. There could also be trade sanctions and other means which could undermine their economies.

Thus they rather swallow the bitter pill and bear the humiliation of continued subordination by developed countries and their new forms of colonialism. Dr Mahathir is prepared to speak up and has said that he will continue to do so even though there have been attempts to twist his arm and efforts to silence him.

Some do not like the fact that Dr Mahathir speaks up, perhaps he hammers

home the truth and the truth hurts. Others are willing and prepared to lambast Dr Mahathir, not suspecting that there could be a Malaysian among the audience. But when confronted by a Malaysian they immediately become defensive.

During an evening seminar at Harvard last week, a leading US fund manager lambasted Dr Mahathir for his statements on the currency crisis. Later when a Malaysian approached the fund manager and introduced herself, the fund manager was surprised to find a Malaysian among the audience and immediately became defensive, especially since the said Malaysian was a journalist. He then said, "I hope I was not too rough on Dr Mahathir".

The Malaysian replied that it was a free country and he (the fund manager) was entitled to his views just as Dr Mahathir was entitled to the basic human right of free speech. In addition, as the Prime Minister of a country, Dr Mahathir has been entrusted with the right to speak on behalf of his fellow countrymen.

The fund manager then replied that Dr Mahathir "speaks too much". The fund manager was reminded that Dr Mahathir could not be faulted for speaking up. Then again what is too much?

After all the Americans with their First Amendment would not want anyone else to be denied their basic human rights. That is what the Americans are claiming to champion in Myanmar, China and a number of other countries around the world. Why then deny the Malaysian Prime Minister his basic right and freedom to speak?

Clearly there cannot be double standards and every one has a right to express themselves no matter what colour, creed, religion or part of the world they come from.

Why deny the citizens of a country to decide who they want as their leader? Malaysia is a democratic country and its leaders are democratically elected. Whether foreigners like it or not does not matter as long as Malaysians choose who they want according to their constitution and rule of law.

For non Malaysians to urge Dr Mahathir to resign, when they have no locus standi, is beyond comprehension and unacceptable. Can Malaysians for example ask President Clinton to resign when they do not like what he says, or for the various Bills that discriminate against developing countries that are passed by the US Administration? Clearly it is not possible or even thinkable. So why should non Malaysians have a say in who leads Malaysia or is at the helm of its democratically elected Government?

Perhaps they feel that they need to stop Dr Mahathir from speaking up. He has been a thorn in the side of many for far too long and it hurts too much. Perhaps being a medical doctor Dr Mahathir has some insight into what hurts man the most.

Leaders from developing countries are not supposed to speak up and especially not so loud. They should do what they are told and not ask too many questions or plan initiatives that question the existing and current pecking order. They should not initiate moves and form coalitions that will strengthen the position of developing countries and enable them to safeguard and enhance their domestic positions.

Are leaders in developing countries not supposed to ensure the well being of their peoples and the continued prosperity and stability of their countries?

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