

08/08/1997

Despite early snags, Asean a success now: PM

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Asean has emerged as one of the most cohesive regional groupings in the world.

He said Asean leaders have been able to pull through despite early difficulties to make a success of the organisation, even in terms of economic cooperation which was not its principal objective.

"I must admit that when Asean was first formed, I was not too hopeful that it would succeed," the Prime Minister said.

"There were too many differences between the parties to the agreement ... major differences. It would not be possible for them to cooperate but I must say I was wrong."

Dr Mahathir said this in a special interview with Bernama in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) today.

The Bangkok Declaration to set up the regional grouping was signed on August 8 1967 by the five founding members - Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984 while Vietnam was admitted in 1995 to make it Asean-7.

It was to have been Asean 10 (encompassing all countries in South-East Asia) last month with the admission of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. However, while Laos and Myanmar are now in, Cambodia's induction has been deferred because of an internal power struggle.

In the interview, Dr Mahathir spoke of his hopes and fears for the region, and commented on the prospects of a conflict among claimants to the Spratly Islands, Asean's constructive engagement policy towards Myanmar, the emergence of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, a multi-media convergence among Asean members and reforms at the UN.

Dr Mahathir said when Asean was formed, it was basically to help resolve problems among neighbours.

Asean provided a forum to resolve problems, if not fully then at least to ease the tension.

Learning from one another, certain members soon discard their apprehension about foreign participation in their domestic economies and recognise the potential contribution of foreign investment to a country's development.

As a result, all Asean countries opened up their economies to foreign investors and this resulted in economic growth and prosperity.

With the transfer of technology, Asean countries themselves embarked on industrialisation.

"So I would say that over the 30 years, the initial gloomy picture has been overcome and Asean has emerged as one of the most cohesive groupings in the world," said Dr Mahathir who will host an informal meeting of Asean heads of government in December.

On his fears for the region, Dr Mahathir said Asean members must be wary of efforts by outside parties to dominate their economies.

"We are moving into the so-called information age and borderless world.

"We have to open up our economy (but) our own companies and corporations are not yet strong enough to compete with those coming from outside.

"There is a real danger of our economy being totally dominated by foreign companies with huge sums of money and greater technology."

On the possibility of a conflict erupting over the Spratly Islands, especially with the biggest claimant China, the Prime Minister said he did

not think there would be an open conflict.

"We can negotiate with China to resolve the whole problem," he said.

China, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan and Brunei lay claim to parts or the entire string of atolls and coral reefs in the South China Sea which are believed to be rich in oil and other resources.

Dr Mahathir also dismissed allegations that Asean's constructive engagement policy towards Myanmar had not been effective in bringing about reforms in that country.

"On the contrary it has been very effective.

"You may remember that under the previous government before the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) ... it refused to have anything to do with anybody at all," he said.

"They were isolationist but after that ... of course partly from internal pressure ... partly from contact with Asean ... they have seen that the way the Asean countries have developed holds out hope for Myanmar also to develop.

"So they have changed a lot. They have now contacts with everybody.

"They are willing to be a member of a community."

On the apprehension that Apec would overtake Asean when the forum was first mooted, Dr Mahathir said it is true that Apec has to a certain extent overshadowed Asean.

"There is no doubt about that.

"Of course, we entered Apec not as a grouping but as individual countries. But there is no way that we can avoid Apec because this is formed by powerful countries. And if you don't join, you'll be isolated," he said.

Dr Mahathir also does not rule out the possibility of a multi-media convergence among Asean countries' individual projects and programmes.

Commenting on the proposal that regional groupings like Asean be given a permanent seat in an expanded UN Security Council, he said it would be a good idea but the grouping should also be given the veto.

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