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In the company of global IT shakers

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TO be accused of and squarely condemned for witch-hunting George Soros for wrecking the Asian currencies and to be named one of the world's 50 most influential persons in global information technology cannot be all that bad in the life of a political leader.

This is the case with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. While on the one hand he was accused of being misplaced in his attack of currency speculator George Soros, on the other he was rated the 29th most powerful mover and shaker of the Information Age.

For that he earned the title of "Cyber Elite". The listing also makes him the only political leader among the likes of Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch, Steve Case, Andy Grove, Steve Jobs and Steven Spielberg.

The listing is done by the US-based Time magazine in what it described as "the first annual look at the digital world's 50 shakers". It appears in the Sept 22 issue of the magazine.

The issue features Soros on the cover - a fact that has a lot to do with his newly-found notoriety in Asia.

Introducing its listing of the cyber elite, Time wrote: "Technology has ushered in a new ruling class. They're into everything from music to multinationals, and all of them are changing the way the world moves.

"The trapping of power has changed. The industrial capitalists, who could gauge their influence by the number of factories, coal mines and oil wells they possessed, have been replaced by a new cyber elite, whose global hegemony is based on nothing more (or less) tangible than the sand of the microchips, the light of the fibre-optic pulses and the ethereal riches of their best ideas.

"Yet these men and women hold the power to create the future with a grip their robber-baron predecessors would have envied."

Heading the list jointly are the Microsoft trio - Steve Ballmer, Bill Gates and Nathan Myhrvold - followed by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, Steve Case (chairman and CEO of America Online) and Masayoshi Son (president Softbank Corporation).

OF Dr Mahathir, Time wrote: "Mahathir knows that fast development requires a deft, if not clenched, hand. Under his administration, Malaysia has enjoyed eight straight years of eight per cent economic growth, fired by manufactured goods like microchips and semiconductors, which account for 80 per cent of exports.

"The price for this meteoric growth? His critics clamour for a free Press, an independent judiciary and greater attention to environmental concerns. One concession to the populist democracy of the Information Age has been made: there will be no Internet censorship within the newly announced (Multimedia) Super Corridor zone.

"1997 Power Play: Last August, Dr M officially launched one of the most ambitious IT initiatives anywhere: his Multimedia Super Corridor. He hopes that the Super Corridor, served by a US\$2 billion fibre-optic network with a reported 2.5-10 gigabyte throughput, will catapult Malaysia `from the industrial age to the Information Age'.

"Bill Gates has signed on to the corridor's international advisory panel and, after a personal visit from Mahathir, has agreed to make Malaysia Microsoft's Southeast Asia headquarters, dumping Singapore in the process. Not bad for a country with only about 100,000 Internet users.

"Place your bets: Malaysia is a leader among the Southeast Asia tiger economies. There are fortunes to be made - or lost - in everything from infrastructure to chip manufacturing. Try a mutual fund focused on emerging markets."

THAT one American extremist should be allowed to jeopardise the already fragile Middle East peace initiative is an insult to humanity and strengthens the long-held view that American Jews are sometimes more extreme and violent than the Jews living in Israel.

After making a lot of money feeding on human greed and frailty, bingo parlour-chain operator, an American Jew by the name of Irving Moskowitz is using his money to fuel hatred and foil the peace process.

According to international news agencies, undeterred by United States, Arab, and Israeli condemnation, Moskowitz took to the Israeli Supreme Court his bid to foster a new East Jerusalem settlement.

The settlers bankrolled by Moskowitz rejected a compromise offer by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to vacate the site temporarily and leave behind a token Jewish presence.

Moskowitz went on the offensive, asking the Supreme Court to tie Netanyahu's hands by issuing a temporary order banning the Prime Minister from evicting the families.

As is always the case, the work of many wise, peace-loving people that took years to achieve can be destroyed overnight by an extremist like Moskowitz.

He is no better than the suicide bombers who killed civilians in Israel and elsewhere. In fact, he is worse because unlike the suicide bombers who died together with their victims, Moskowitz fights his proxy war from the comfort and safety of his Miami office.

But Moskowitz is neither alone nor is he the first person to attempt to destroy the Middle East peace initiative.

And his is certainly not the only example of radicalism, extremism and terrorism which was born and bred in the US.

It is not incorrect to say with some measure of certainty that no country, by virtue of its political and economic system, breeds radicalism, extremism and terrorism more virulently than the United States.

But because these tendencies are often disguised as expression of freedom, they generally escape public attention and scrutiny until they become violent or destructive.

Americans took no notice of heavily armed civilians in military uniform carrying out military-type training in secluded places until America's number one terrorist in recent history, Timothy McVeigh, blew up the Oklahoma government building on April 1995 killing 168 people and injuring another 500. He has since been sentenced to death.

A year earlier, a US-born and trained Jewish doctor by the name of Baruch Goldstein opened fire and killed 29 Muslims who were praying in a mosque in Jerusalem. He had just gone to live in Israel.

In July last year, 12 members of a paramilitary group were arrested in Phoenix, Arizona, thwarting what Federal authorities said was a plot to bomb seven government buildings. Weapons and bomb-making materials were confiscated.

The US is also well known for violent religious extremism that saw cult and sect members using firearms to confront authorities. A classic example was the Branch Dravidian cult led by David Koresh.

In a stand-off with US Federal agents at their stronghold in Waco, Texas, in 1993, some 80 cult members died in the ensuing fire.

The most famous cult-inspired mass suicide happened in 1978 when

followers of American Rev Jim Jones drank poison at their Guyana sanctuary, Jonestown. Nine hundred and thirteen people died.

Sadly, these and other examples of radicalism, extremism and terrorism that took place at America's doorstep do not stop the country from accusing others of sponsoring terrorism and in trying to force its brand of democracy on others.

I AGREE with reader P. Hoong Ooi of Petaling Jaya who wrote in the letters page of the New Straits Times on Friday that the reply by the operator of the Express Rail Link (NST, Sept 16) on the proposed fares for rail travel to and fro the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang is misleading.

Only people who are totally ignorant of elementary economics and uninformed about the world will be fooled by the comparison given by Norhayati Sulaiman of the Corporate Communications Department of ERL.

It is an insult to the intelligence of Malaysians for her to compare the fare to be charged by ERL for its Kuala Lumpur-KLIA service with those of similar services in Switzerland, Japan, the United Kingdom and Germany.

As pointed out by reader P. Hoong Ooi, the countries mentioned are developed and, therefore, have a high per capita and household incomes.

The ERL had argued that the 54 sen per kilometre it plans to charge for using the dedicated fast train is "very competitive" and drew a comparison with Geneva (Switzerland) which charges 156 sen per km, Shinosaka-Kansai (Osaka, Japan) (136 sen), Tokyo-Narita Airport (102 sen), Paddington-Heathrow Airport (London) (87 sen), Gatwick Airport-London (72 sen), Zurich (Switzerland) (71 sen) and Munich (Germany) (62 sen).

What ERL neglected to compare is the economic standard of these countries vis-a-vis Malaysia.

Fifty-four sen a km or RM31 for the entire journey may be very cheap and very little for somebody in Switzerland. This is because on the basis of purchasing power parity (PPP), the per capita GDP (gross domestic product) of Switzerland is US\$26,315.

Japan's per capita GDP is US\$23,440, Britain US\$20,170 and Germany US\$20,864. Malaysia's per capita GDP, if ERL people care to know, is only US\$9,835.

Of course, for Swiss, British, Japanese and German travellers who may be using ERL service when they come to Malaysia, the rate is very cheap. With our lower cost of living and now the weak ringgit, their purchasing power on the PPP basis will be considerably higher in Malaysia.

But 54 sen a km and RM31 for a one-way travel cannot be cheap for a Malaysian user. By the way, the actual fare on the basis of 54 sen a km and the distance between the KLIA and Kuala Lumpur of 57km should be RM30.78 and not RM31.

This business of rounding up prices to the nearest ringgit should have its limit and must be based on an accepted formula.

Norhayati, her bosses and shareholders at ERL may not have a problem forking out 54 sen a km or RM30.78 for the entire one-way journey. But it is best to remember that not all Malaysians are well-to-do.

The same goes to other operators of privatised projects. While their bottomlines are important, impoverishing and bankrupting the masses cannot be a good business strategy.

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