

07 AUG 1997

Interview

MAHATHIR: ASEAN HAS COME A LONG WAY ...

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 7 (Bernama) -- In conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) tomorrow, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad granted a special interview to Bernama acting Editor-in-Chief Syed Jamil Jaafar and Executive Editor Zainoor Sulaiman.

The Prime Minister was asked for his thoughts on the successes and failures of the regional grouping as well as the outlook for the future.

Following is the transcript of the interview:

Question: What are your perceptions of Asean, its successes and failures over the past 30 years and your hopes and vision for the next 30 years?

Prime Minister: Firstly, I must admit that when Asean was first formed, I was not too hopeful that it would succeed. 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. Despite the early difficulties, the Asean leaders have managed to pull it through and also to make a success of it, not just in terms of economic cooperation which was not the principal objective of Asean. The principal objective of Asean was how to resolve problems between neighbours. There was some kind of tension, differences of opinion but Asean provided a forum to resolve them. Not fully, but at least to reduce the tension.

The countries learnt from each other what is the right approach. Whereas initially, possibly due to independence and nationalism, certain countries seemed to reject foreign participation in their economy. But it was seen that foreign investment could contribute towards the development of a country and as a result, all the Asean countries opened up their economy to foreign investors and this has resulted in economic growth and subsequent prosperity. And the transfer of technology, which resulted in Asean countries themselves becoming able to participate in 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.

Q: As host of the 30th anniversary of Asean, are you disappointed that the realisation of Asean 10 has been delayed?

PM: Well, I am disappointed. I didn't foresee this. I thought that Myanmar would be a problem but as it turned out it was not Myanmar but some internal problems of Cambodia that had resulted in it not becoming a member. But I still hope that certain changes would be made so that it could become part of Asean.

Q: Do you think this will be soon?

PM: We don't know .. but it is possible.

Q: There are allegations that Asean seemed powerless in the face of the Cambodian problem ...

PM: No, we have never, never thought that Asean would be able to interfere in the interanl affairs of any country. We have never done that, even when members of Asean have internal problems. We never interfere but they resolve these problems themselves.

Q: With the admission of Myanmar into Asean despite opposition from the United States and Europe, do you foresee fierce pressure being applied on Asean to speed up changes in Myanmar?

PM: Well, there has always been pressure on us with regard to Myanmar but we believe that the best way to help matters would be to have contact with people, to demonstrate that there is nothing to fear from a more liberal attitude toward the people. Over time I think there will be improvements but we cannot push too hard. We can't achieve everything overnight.

Q: It has been said that Asean's constructive engagement policy (towards Myanmar) has not been very effective ...

PM: 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), that government was reclusive, it refused to have anything to do with anybody at all. They were isolationist but after that ... of course partly from internal pressure but 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 where before they were isolationist. They are willing to accept foreign direct investment, foreign participation in their economy. They are much more developed and I can't see how anybody can say that this direct engagement has not produced result. It has produced tremendous results.

Q: Inevitably when South-east Asia is discussed, the spectre of a flash point in the Spratlys is raised. Do you foresee the possibility of a real conflict among the claimants to the atolls, especially with China?

PM: There will be differences. There will be some strain and tension perhaps but conflict, open conflict, is something that I don't foresee. We can negotiate with China to resolve the whole problem.

Q: What are your fears for the region in the future?

PM: 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. For example, they can easily swallow up our telecommunications industry, leaving nothing for us. They can completely control our media, because their media is powerful. They have the money ... they can buy out everybody (by) making an offer that cannot be refused. So in the end, the rich people from outside can dominate the poor people in countries like Asean. Already we are seeing it in the way (United States financier, George) Soros had tried to undermine Asean (by destabilising their currencies). We have worked for 30 years to build up a good economy. Our people are enjoying a fairly good life but in just a few days, the incomes of even the poorest

people have now been reduced. They are made poorer by the same amount of loss that we have sustained ... billions of dollars have been lost within a few days. When you know that it took us years to build up. So this is what I fear.

Q: What can we do?

PM: I think there must be some definition about what constitutes international crime. For example, if people grow poppy in their country and we can take action against them, although it's not in our own country ...take the case of the President of Panama who was arrested and taken back to the United States for trial under U.S. laws. There must some international understanding that international crime such as economic sabotage should be subject to international laws. We should be able to take action against them.

Q: Will Malaysia be taking any initiative in this direction?

PM: Well, we will talk about it. I know people are worried and afraid because these are very powerful forces, backed by very powerful countries and anything we try to do of course will be stopped by them because it's not in their interest.

Q: How do you see the role of the United Nations? There has been a proposal that a regional grouping like Asean be given a permanent seat in the Security Council?

PM: Yes, that would be a good idea if a grouping like Asean is given a permanent seat in the Security Council but it should also be given the veto, so that we too can stop others from doing what we feel is harmful to us. Alternatively, we feel that nobody should have any veto. Or if we must have the veto, the veto cannot be exercised by just one group.

Q: The United States will not agree?

PM: Of course they will not agree. Big, powerful countries never agree to surrendering even a little bit of their power.

Q: What will be Asean's greatest challenge in the so-called borderless world?

PM: Well, although it is borderless we have to remember that the crossing must not be in one direction. People should not take advantage of our not having any borders to come to take what belongs to us, when we are not in a position to take what belongs to others. So Asean must be fully aware. The only way that Asean can react is to act together.

Q: Malaysia is pushing vigorously its Multi-Media Super Corridor (MSC) project while Singapore has its own Information Technology programme and so too has the Philippines. Do you foresee a convergence among the Asean countries in this area of multi-media?

PM: Yes, I think there will be. In fact the MSC has already provided for cooperation with other similar projects elsewhere. We know that we are not going to have a monopoly. So if there are other projects elsewhere, we are willing to work together. In fact we are willing to work even with European countries. Like Hungary for example, we have signed an agreement

to work them.

Q: Do you foresee a multi-media convergence in Asean that other regions might emulate?

PM: It's possible. Of course, Asean is much more cohesive than most other groupings.

Q: When the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum was first mooted, there was a lot of apprehension that it would overtake Asean. Is this true today?

PM: Yes, to a certain extent Apec has 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.

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