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Mahathir - Asean

MAHATHIR: ASEAN HAS PULLED THROUGH DESPITE INITIAL DIFFICULTIES

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 7 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean has overcome its initial gloomy picture to emerge as one of the most cohesive regional groupings in the world.

He said Asean leaders had been able to pull through despite early difficulties to make a success of the organisation, and not just in terms of economic cooperation which was never 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) tomorrow.

The Bangkok Declaration to set up the regional grouping was signed on Aug 8 1967 by 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 Atolls, 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 United Nations.

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

There was some kind of tension but Asean provided a forum to resolve the problems, if not fully, at least to reduce the tension.

The member countries learnt from each other what was the right approach and whereas initially, possibly due to independence and nationalism, certain countries seemed to reject foreign participation in their economy, it was later seen that foreign investment could contribute towards a country's development.

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

With the transfer of technology, Asean countries themselves became 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," 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 need to be wary of efforts by outside parties to dominate their economy.

"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."

He said the only way for Asean to react was to act together.

On the possibility of a real conflict erupting over the Spratly islands territorial claim, especially with biggest claimant China, the Prime Minister said he did not think there would be an open conflict.

He said there would be some strain and tension perhaps but open conflict was something that he could not foresee.

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

China, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan and Brunei lay claim to part 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), that government was reclusive, 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 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."

On the apprehension that APEC would overtake Asean when the forum was first mooted, Dr Mahathir said it was true that Apec had 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 does not rule out the possibility of a multi-media convergence being forged among Asean countries in the future with Malaysia pushing its Multi-media Super Corridor (MSC) project, Singapore its Information Technology programme and the Philippines its own cyber scheme.

"I think there will be (a convergence). 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."

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

"(This is) 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."

-- Bernama

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