

26/11/1997

## Our activism pays dividends

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"OVER the years, in many ways, things have just crept up on us. And without us realising it, we are big players," says Tan Sri Razali Ismail, Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former President of the United Nations General Assembly.

Razali gives most of the credit for Malaysia's role in the international arena to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who he says is a man who is not prepared to just go at the traditional pace of a developing country.

"While we are on the fast-track towards industrialisation, we are doing things overseas as part of that great energy and pro-activism and for some reason it evokes something from Malaysian citizens."

He explains that we can bash the big guys and get away with it because "we are at a distance".

"We are not neighbours, nor enemies, nor allies, and because of these three conditions, it gives us more room to say things. It also helps that our country is doing well and the economy is strong.

"They know that our activism is not simply posturing ... there is meaning to what we do. Dr Mahathir has a big fan club at the UN, where whatever he says is listened to.

"They always tell me, 'We wish we could say this but we are not in a position to say it and we are glad that your Prime Minister has said it'."

He is proud that his little country of less than 20 million people can get such support and the backing of other nations, especially those from the South.

But he says: "We are not simply posturing and talking, we back it up by trying to do something on the ground. Malaysia is one of the largest contributors to the Unprofor in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other troubled places in the world.

"We have South-South co-operation quite well developed. Our economic statistics with Africa have tripled since 1990."

Razali says that is not the only benefit of Malaysia's prominent role in international affairs. Our private sector has been able to compete with some of the biggest companies in the West.

"In Zimbabwe, we outbid the British firms for the power contract. In South Africa, we joined hands with an American company to do telecommunications.

"Ten years ago, you wouldn't have thought this was possible. These are the dividends that have come our way as a result of our activism.

"I don't think that even if there is a change in leadership that the choice is there for us to de-emphasise or to de-escalate.

"We will continue because people expect our foreign policy to be like that - always to lock horns, to get something moving."

However, he says, Malaysia has reached a point where it must assess its position in the world stage. While we have been accusing the United States of being selective, of politicising human rights and the inconsistency of its foreign policy, Malaysia too may become guilty of the same.

"Americans are not consistent, but they don't try to hide that. For us too, it is easier to talk about Bosnia or some place far away than it is for us to talk about Myanmar.

"We have to come to terms with that. If we are inconsistent, we must recognise why we are inconsistent. The time of reckoning has come. As we

go forward, people will check us out on everything whether we like it or not.

"Especially us, because we always say things to people, we will have to explain ourselves and this is the business of diplomacy."

Razali worries though, that Malaysia does not have the institutions and resources to handle this in future.

The Government, he feels, must pay attention to the next generation of diplomats.

"I always believe that foreign policy must be handled with consistency and exactitude and, of course, some sophistication to play with words.

"We have gone so far internationally. Do we have the institutional backup, do we have the people with the intellectual dexterity?"

In the economic front, Malaysia has honed people with skills so that Malaysia can go up against the big guys and compete anywhere in the world. Malaysia, he says, must now train its diplomats so they can do the same.

"We must run away from the belief that we only need glorified protocol people to take care of VIPs at airports," he emphasises.

According to Razali, another issue Malaysia needs to consider is that in terms of our economic and technological abilities. "We are closer to certain countries in Europe than we are to many countries in Africa.

"Malaysia has technology that really does not qualify us as developing any more. We are moving, whether we like it or not, towards OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). We have to take stock and balance out where we are going from this point."

Razali goes on to say that there is too much disparity in the conditions of the developing world. The Group of 15 is far ahead in terms of development compared with the rest.

"These things we are beginning to see in the UN. When the South try to cobble together a position for the South, you will find some countries feeling uncomfortable.

"For example, how can you expect Singapore to speak on behalf of the Fiji Islands, or represent the position of the Fiji Islands? They are not at the same level and do not face the same problems."

He also says that there is a lot more that Malaysia can do on the regional level and within Asean.

"In the region, there must also be a commitment to the principles of democratisation. Are we in a position to influence the process of democratisation in our neighbours?"

"Malaysia and Asean have yet to develop the ability and the willingness to want to say things openly about other people, especially their neighbours.

"It has to be a very serious situation and one that relates to sacred cows, like religion, before you hear us say something. This is where co-operation within Asean has not developed ... it has to do with our culture too, to move slowly."

He feels that these are the questions and issues that the Foreign Ministry must consider. Malaysia's success in foreign affairs is led by Dr Mahathir, but it is time for Wisma Putra to be more pro-active and not simply play follow the leader.

On a personal note, Razali says he is looking forward to retiring next year. "I miss home, I miss the Malaysian environment. I am tired of dealing with intangibles. I want to deal with solid things. I would like to know if all the talents I have hocked overseas for years is of any use here.

"I want to get involved in dealing with universal principles. I believe the time has come for Malaysia to concentrate on these things too. All the things we say outside must impact the society itself."

Razali is proud to be the chairman of Yayasan Salam and is looking forward to becoming more involved with the foundation when he returns.

"It would be heartbreaking to find out that I am not really relevant inside the country, though I am relevant outside the country.

"I don't believe so. I think there are things I can contribute. I want to get involved, after all, I am not retiring from life," he says with a smile.

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