

30/09/1997

The right to choose our friends

SOME would think Malaysia foolish. Why incur the wrath of certain powerful nations by befriending governments that these powers have labelled their enemies? The Government's decision to forge close trade and investment ties with Cuba could invite such a risk. As it is, Malaysia has already stuck its neck out too many times by fostering ties with the likes of Myanmar and, to some extent, China. It has also gone against some of the wishes of the Americans and the Europeans a little too often, at the United Nations, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Asia-Europe Meeting and other forums.

But as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir pointed out: "We are here in Cuba because we believe in constructive engagement that is aimed at enriching the economy of both countries." Dr Mahathir said consistent with the realities of the current global economic environment, Malaysia has to seek new partnerships and linkages to grow its economy through trade and investments. It is in this light that Malaysian seeks new friends in the region and his visit to Havana marks Malaysia's earnest desire to establish and develop mutual economic linkages with Cuba and its people. But at the same time, Malaysians cannot expect those countries that have labelled Cuba their enemy to understand Malaysia's position. It is still possible, as the Prime Minister had conceded, that pressure will be applied on the Malaysian Government to reconsider its decision. In keeping with the Helms-Burton anti-Cuba law, for example, we may be pressured for having trade relations with Cuba. Or as in the case of Myanmar, the pressure may come in other forms.

Such pressures, however, should not deter the Government from doing what it thinks is going to benefit both nations, especially the peoples. Malaysia has on many occasions expressed its desire to strike win-win-win situations, in line with its Malaysia Inc concept and Smart Partnership that it has continuously promoted. In the case of Myanmar, for instance, that country could have continued to isolate itself from its neighbours as well as the rest of the world if Asean had not initiated its constructive engagement policy in an effort to woo it back into the economic mainstream. Now Yangon is more open to the world and this will benefit not only its people but also the region. In terms of trade and investment, it will in time also benefit the US and Europe.

Cuba, the only communist country in the western hemisphere, should not be treated as a "rogue" nation. Differences in ideologies must not be a barrier. If Cuban President Fidel Castro wants to trade with other countries or wants to attract investments from Malaysia, then that is a positive sign that the outside world is obliged to respond. If Malaysia responds positively to the potential that Cuba offers its businessmen and people, then other nations ought not stand in the way of Malaysia's good intentions. It would be different if the world had shunned and threatened Serbia for its ethnic-cleansing sins in Bosnia. Or if the world decides to impose sanctions against Israel for defying the peace accord signed on the White House lawn four years ago; or condemn the invasion by Russian forces; or abolish diplomatic relations with any country that tries to emulate the apartheid regime of South Africa.

But communism or the personality of a leader is not reason enough to distance ourselves with a country. Human rights violations and the invasion of the sovereignty of a nation are valid reasons, but even these

should be decided democratically, not unilaterally as had been the case with many situations in the past. If Cubans had been tortured and forced to accept communism, then the international community could rule against countries that wish to forge good relations with Cuba. But the Cubans embraced communism as the Americans embraced democracy. In Cuba there too are other beliefs and ideologies, just like in the US and the rest of the world. Ideologies, as long as they do not act against humanity or violate internationally-accepted values and norms, should not be obstacles to better relations between two countries or regions.

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