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Time to review human rights

EXCEPT for divine revelation, nothing is immutable. So it is only logical that we reassess our values periodically so that they are in consonance with the times. So also it is logical as Tun Daim Zainuddin, the Economic Adviser to the Government, said on Saturday that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted 49 years ago, should be reviewed. This declaration was promulgated on Dec 10, 1948 in the aftermath of the Second World War by the United Nations in its avowed mission to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," and put into place elaborate and authoritative international human rights norms and standards.

Though perhaps valid when it was conceived, the concept of human rights was the percept of the superpowers that were dominant in the United Nations in 1948. But times have changed. For one, the number of sovereign nations on the planet have increased. Indeed even the number of countries in the UN has swelled from 40 when it was formed to more than 180 today.

And not all countries are on the same economic footing. Many are poor; some are developing; some are rich. It is only logical therefore all should have different perceptions of human rights. The rights of the individual prevailing over the rights of the community or the country, thus, is a philosophical rhetoric. For, as Daim expressed it, almost all cultures in varying degrees stress the importance of the community and the need for individual rights to be subordinate to the greater interest of the community.

True, the rights of the individual is a pillar of democracy. But it is only one of the many pillars, though the West gives the individual far more importance and regards human rights as an important, if not the sole, indicator of a democracy. Developing countries, by and large, want to practise democracy. But they practise it in ways different from the liberal forms prescribed by the West, forms which will retard their development and continued independence.

The poor and not so poor countries espouse democracy but their greater priority is to develop economically so that they do not remain dependent on aids and handouts of the rich countries that often are doled out with conditions on how the recipient nations should run their countries. And the road to economic growth these countries take might not necessarily be the road the rich countries deem democratic.

Moreover, the countries that speak much about democracy and human rights do not have untainted records. Some countries that were leading lights in formulating the declaration have yet to comply with all the provisions in the document. As Daim said, the United States' human rights policy and practice is a relevant case. It certainly has not attained the objectives of human rights it set for itself when it gained independence. After more than 220 years, there still remains in that country pockets of resistance to accept African Americans are equals. Thus their mantra that "all men are created equal" rings hollow.

Clearly then Daim is right in asking UN members to consider whether the declaration could really serve as a "common standard of achievement for all people and all nations." And since it obviously does not, a review is necessary. And Malaysia might take the lead. As the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on Sunday, the country might submit a proposal to the UN to review the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

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