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A principle worth defending

ASEAN'S long-established principle of non-interference has been subjected to great stress as seen in recent events and, particularly, in the call for its abolishment. As pointed out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Asean has not decided to abolish the very principle upon which its foundation rests and thus, the principle should be respected by all and sundry.

He is not isolated in his stand. A number of Asean countries still subscribe to the view that its members should not comment on the internal affairs of an Asean member. The logic is compelling. As Dr Mahathir puts it: "If we start doing that, there will be bad relations because we have a lot of things to criticise each other." It is a point which has been reiterated by Malaysia on several occasions - the dismantling of the principle will put the grouping on the path toward eventual disintegration.

It is worthwhile remembering that the founders of Asean did not design it to be one of those associations where "Till whims do us part". Non-interference in a member's internal affairs is meant to foster trust, mutual confidence and goodwill. As envisaged by its founders, Asean is designed to function by strict consensus. Its formula is one of pragmatic co-operation based on a clear identification of mutual interests and shared goals. The strength of its consensus, which has been lauded by many, is derived from the non-interference principle. And the ability to set aside the differences arising out of domestic politics is what gives Asean the cohesion to act on its common goals.

This historical tradition of Asean should not be reduced to mere mythological piffle. As has been pointed out by many elders of Asean, any rejection of the principle would be a monumental mistake as it will turn Asean into a fractious association. Unfortunately, there has been an upsurge of a brand of moralism in the region which invites the temptation to meddle in the domestic affairs of a member and poses a challenge to the core identity of Asean. Some call it a crusade for righteousness and justice in the region and attribute it to a growing awareness among the young in Asean but we think it is no more than an attempt to mount a strenuous defence of the "Western" notion of human rights - one which could be encouraged by external elements. It is pathetic that one or two leaders of member countries seize the occasion to promote their own agenda - be it to score points in their countries or to divert their people's attention from pressing domestic matters. But they must ask themselves: What manner of international statesmanship is gained at the expense of Asean's unity and stability?

The march of this trend, if it can be called one, is not inexorable. It can be checked and repulsed by member countries who must re-affirm and honour their commitment to the principle. There should be no room for careless abandonment of the principle since, as stated by Dr Mahathir in agreement with Thailand's Prime Minister, a member country wanting to criticise another can do so through bilateral consultation. The art of diplomacy is, after all, to find a meeting ground on contentious issues.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, bilateral problems among Asean countries are mere hiccups which do not tear Asean apart. Regional peace and security have always prevailed - an outcome made possible by Asean's strength of unity. A unity that recognises the principle of non-

interference as sacrosanct.

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