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Leave us to practise our brand of Press freedom

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MUCH has been said by the foreign media about the "high-handedness" of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad since the sacking of his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He is being lambasted consistently by the foreign media and one only has to switch on to CNBC or CNN most nights to hear this being emphasised and re-emphasised to the point that it is beginning to sicken most Malaysians!

Some Malaysians seem to have lost perspective in the last month, beginning with Anwar's sacking.

It would seem that all that Dr Mahathir has done and achieved for the country has paled into insignificance in the light of his so-called "high-handedness" of recent events.

This is a shame, and as a Malaysian, I am concerned that some Malaysians are being dragged into believing that Anwar's so-called "reform" movement is necessarily going to be better for the country and for all of us.

I would like to echo Dr Mahathir's sentiment about the so-called "objectivity" of the foreign Press by quoting the following excerpt from a book titled Can Asians Think? by Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean educated at Harvard University.

Mahbubani says on page 65 of his book: "The recent Ayodhya incident demonstrated one important new dimension for societies all around the globe.

"The Indian media tried to control emotional reactions by restricting the broadcasting and distribution of video scenes of the destruction of the mosque.

"But now so many Indian homes can see video clips (transmitted through satellites and tapes) from foreign news agencies which felt no reason to exercise social, political or moral restraint.

"Those who happily transmitted the video clips never had to bear the consequences themselves. They were sitting comfortably in Atlanta, Georgia or Hong Kong, while the riots that followed in India as a result of their TV transmissions never reached their homes.

"Unfortunately, these media personnel did not stop to consider whether they could have saved other human lives, not their own, by exercising restraint."

Any person watching CNN or CNBC news items on Malaysia would be forgiven for arriving at the natural conclusion that the country is in absolute chaos when in fact, even if 10 or 20 or even 50,000 demonstrate for Anwar's reform movement, there are still over 20 million Malaysians sitting in their homes or offices going about their daily activities.

It is obviously too much to expect them to also show clippings of Malaysians who are going about their business as usual as they are in the business of sensationalising news so as to "sell" their networks.

Mahbubani further states on page 79 of his book that he has yet to meet an American who has any doubts about the virtues of a free Press.

Even those who despise most journalists as "scum of the earth" would not have it any other way.

The value of freedom of the Press is absolute and unchallenged.

The paradox here is while they believe the virtues of a free Press to be self-evident, they show no hesitation in ramming this concept down the throats of societies that are not enamoured by it.

I would urge the foreign Press (CNBC and CNN), the advocates of "human

rights" and freedom of the Press, to examine themselves and not be so condescending in their message to Malaysians, evidenced by the presentation of their programmes, that they believe we do not have such a thing as human rights and freedom of the Press in Malaysia.

The fact is we do, albeit not to the standards that they would like!

Naturally, we have a long way to go but the issue is we have made a quantum leap after 41 years of independence.

It took Western societies more decades than just four to arrive at where they are today.

Dr Mahathir himself was expelled from the party but I must say that his handling of his expulsion was a lot more mature than Anwar.

As the saying goes, an empty vessel makes the loudest noise.

It is almost a pity that he was not as concerned nor as vociferous with reform whilst he was in government.

Let me just make a point here that I am not a staunch supporter of either Dr Mahathir or Anwar.

I think most Malaysians are capable of arriving at the conclusion that much has been done for the country in the last decade and Dr Mahathir's own reform for the country speaks for itself.

The current economic crisis is not of his making and he is dealing with the problem as best as he can.

Let us not make his work harder or our own lives more difficult by allowing the Anwar issue to cloud the real problems facing the people through the manipulation of the foreign media.

The foreign media is doing an excellent job of "rubbishing" the country by itself, let us not give it a helping hand!

We respect the right of foreign Governments to govern and practise their brand of freedom of the Press and human rights the way they want.

Is it too much to expect them to leave us to practise our brand of Press freedom and human rights as we please?

As Mahbubani aptly puts it in his book: "Can they not let the virtues of their system and ours speak for themselves?"

"As in the world of ideals, if a social system has merits, it will fly on its own wings. If it does not, it will not.

"Most Asians now know enough of these systems to make their own choices. Let us do so in peace!"