

29/12/1998

`Criticisms obscure strength of US, Malaysia relations'

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JOHN Malott says he can take his time here and split it right down the middle. The first half was wonderful but the second seemed to produce one crisis after another.

"My happiest time would have been from the Hari Raya of 1997 until the time of the financial crisis. The reason was that I had been here a year, I was starting to get to know the people and really coming to enjoy Malaysia.

"In terms of work things were going well. Things were excellent in the (US-Malaysia) relationship, the Malaysian economy was growing like crazy and everyone could see how good the relationship was," says Malott.

Then in July that year, everything changed. He says Malaysia became a very different country, perhaps because it was facing a crisis. Then there was the haze and the relationship between the two countries went through a bad spell.

"There was the Wexler resolution, the ILSA sanctions and people calling up our embassy saying they want to kill Americans. It was an awful time."

He is referring to the 34 Congressmen who wanted to pass a resolution calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over his alleged anti-Semitic remarks and the economic sanctions threatened against Petronas for its investment along with Total of France and Gazprom of Russia in Iran.

"It seems over the year-and-a-half there has been a lot of criticism of the US. That's not pleasant and I do take it personally because it's my own country. I'm as proud of my country as Malaysians are of theirs. And I think my country has done a lot of good things for Malaysia," explains Malott.

He says the criticisms of his country obscure the real progress and strength of the relationship. The US is Malaysia's top trading partner. For several years, America has been Malaysia's largest export market and investor.

"No one in the world buys more Malaysian products than we do. In the first nine months of this year, Malaysia's trade surplus plus US investments in Malaysia totalled US\$8.5 billion (RM32.3 billion). It is not a loan, it's all yours. And yet I read in the papers and hear that the US is not doing anything to help Malaysia during the crisis."

Malott also says professors at Universiti Malaya have found that no country has transferred more technology to Malaysia through investments than the US and half the heads of companies in the American Chamber of Commerce have investments in Malaysia.

US-Malaysia defence co-operation has grown considerably in the last few years. According to Malott most of the leadership in the Malaysian military have studied in US schools and they are in fact sending more trainees there.

Another area that has seen improved ties is law enforcement, especially in the war against dadah trafficking.

"In 1996 we brought several Royal Malaysian Police officers to Atlanta, we deputised them and they became part of the security team for the Olympics. They were there to learn about our experience and then came back and the experience was used for Sukom.

"We have trained Malaysian police in hostage negotiations, VIP protection, cyber-crimes and counterfeiting. I think this is something

that not many people know about."

The two countries have also established a "policy dialogue" on security issues in the region and around the world.

"In my three years, we have had not just the Vice-President, but five members of the Cabinet - State, Defence, Trade, the US trade representative and Agriculture - those that matter most in our relationship have been here.

"We have had 20 to 25 members of Congress and so many admirals and generals that the joke in the embassy is that if you don't have at least three stars on your shoulder we won't pay any attention to you," laughs Malott.

"It has been an excellent relationship. And I ask the question, why aren't more people aware how good the relationship actually is. That is the problem of rhetoric, it obscures and hides the reality."

One of his goals was to bring out the good news. He saw it as part of his job to tell Malaysians the truth and the reality of the relationship and he did it through talking, giving Press interviews ... by "public diplomacy".

"I do that in the States too. I go back every year and tell hundreds of businessmen about Malaysia. But it is hard to do when you are a voice in the wilderness.

"It's hard to compete every day if newspapers, and group editors or letters to the editors are complaining about what the US has most recently done. It is hard for me to do it when political leaders are saying things about the US.

"I don't know why anyone is upset when I defend my country; I would have fired myself if I had not done (it) because then I would not have done my job. If you were to look back at the controversial things I have said, you will see that I have never criticised Malaysia, I will never criticise Malaysia.

"The rhetoric it seems has intensified. It seems to me like every, well not quite every day, Singapore sometimes gets into the limelight," says Malott with a laugh.

"When I came, one of my goals was to close this gap between the rhetoric and the reality and I leave at a time when the gap has widened. So I leave on a sad note in that respect."

On a personal level, he says Malaysians have been wonderful to him. No one has said a bad word to him.

"I had a wonderful personal experience in these last three years. I have never felt threatened, never needed a bodyguard, no matter what the rhetoric or how many letters to the editors," he says.

"To me and to many Americans, this is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. I don't know if Malaysians fully realise how blessed they are by the beauty of this country. And in contrast to many other countries, Malaysia is fortunate that it is not affected by natural disasters, like typhoons, earthquakes, hurricanes or whatever. You missed it all. God has been very generous to Malaysia."

What he loves about Malaysia is its tremendous mix of cultures. From Malay, Chinese, Indian, European, and those of East Malaysia. This was his first time in an Islamic country and it was fascinating for him to learn about Islam.

"In the States, there is an expectation that we should melt and become like each other, but here people are not asked to melt. I find it incredible that I can see all these cultures, races, languages, people living side by side, each celebrating and appreciating their culture and yet still having a sense of pride in being Malaysian.

"You look around the world, and Malaysia stands out in contrast. Look at

Northern Ireland, look at Sri Lanka, look at Bosnia. Look at countries where there is a racial divide. This country is unique, sure it isn't 100 per cent perfect, but I have never seen in my 30 years as a diplomat, a country that has done a better job of allowing people of different backgrounds to live together and still have a sense of one country.

"To me this is what I would call a great sleeper country. If you were to ask me what Malaysia could promote and make a lot of money (from), I would say tourism. Everything is here, beautiful country, it's multiracial, great infrastructure, safe to travel in ... and don't laugh, but you can drink the water, eat the food and not get sick ... that's very important," he says.

Malaysia, he says, has a wonderful story to tell. A story Americans would love to hear because they love success stories, especially those of underdogs.

"We would love to hear the story of a country that started of 40 years ago with the same GNP as Ghana and today is one of the top trading nations of the world. A country that has achieved among the fastest growth rates of the world over the last decade.

"A country that has reduced poverty to almost nothing, that has achieved racial harmony, that has a very good form of government and political stability all these years. A nation that is a lot of fun with lots of nice people.

"A country with a tolerant and humane form of Islam. It is Islam at its purest. Malaysia has shown that it is absolutely possible for Islam and democracy to survive side by side.

"You have a wonderful story to tell, why don't you tell that story?"

As for Malott, after 31 years in the diplomatic service, he ends his career in Malaysia. What he will do next and where he will live: He is unsure. One thing he is certain of is that he will return to this country he has learned to love, despite the rhetoric.

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