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'Don't lose sight of Malaysia's success'

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DISMISSING the foreign perceptions that Malaysia is a totalitarian country, Fred M'membe, the editor-in-chief of Zambia's Post, said critics should also not lose sight of the achievement of this country.

He asked at a talk on Press freedom which government could be as democratic as the Malaysian Government which gave the people the opportunity they had never had before, citing the low poverty level as an example.

M'membe was commenting during the question and answer session on Le Mauricien editor-in-chief Gilbert Ahnee's perception that Malaysia is a totalitarian country.

Ahnee of Mauritius had earlier said that Malaysians were not critical in discussing issues. He cited the case of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as an example where he found most Malaysians feared to make critical comments.

He said he discovered this attitude among Malaysians during his three-day stay to attend the forum.

M'membe stressed that Malaysia was one of the few countries that had recorded economic success without global blunder.

"The economic progress that we see in Europe and America today was achieved out of global blunder, out of slavery and out of colonial domination and this is not a situation in Malaysia," he said.

However, he warned that there were dangers in this peaceful and successful atmosphere if politicians in Malaysia stopped performing their duties.

New Straits Times associate editor Rose Ismail, in reply to Ahnee's assumption, said that there were reasons for the seeming closeness between the mainstream media and the Malaysian Government.

"There are many things at stake like the communist threat ... we are a young country.

"We believe that there are certain things that we need to be careful about," she said.

However, Rose said Malaysian journalists too yearned to be doing what their colleagues in other countries had been doing for their nations.

"We know that those should be our goals and we worry about this partnership between the Government and the Press because we know it could become unhealthy," she said.

Rose also explained that there were still Malaysians who did not fully understand the meaning and implications of democracy.

"There are many in my village who still don't quite understand the full implications of democracy and the full meaning of all these things.

"We are trying as much as we can, within our limits, because we feel that they will learn and in time, all of us will move in tandem," she said.

Rose said she was happy with the presence of foreign editors at the forum in Malaysia as it gave an opportunity to get the real story of the Anwar issue.

"I am glad that you are seeing the actual happening in Malaysia and not relying on what you read in your country ... a lot of people are behind Anwar but a lot of people too are behind Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and even that is not the complete story," she said, adding that they should also meet the people on the streets to have a

balanced perspective.

Datuk V.K. Chin of The Star emphasised that Malaysians did not want any interference from outside on the Anwar issue.

"Actually, we are getting too many interferences from outside over this issue and we are upset.

"Anwar is not a journalist and he has been accused of many crimes and he should defend himself in court.

"As far as the Malaysian journalists are concerned, they are quite happy with their profession," he said, adding that the present Government was elected by the people and if they wanted a change they would have a chance to do it in the year 2000.

However, Civil Liberties Organisation president Ayo Obe could not agree with Chin that outsiders were interfering in Malaysian affairs.

"It is not an interference ... it should be seen as an expression of concern," she said. Obe said Malaysia was actually a role model for developing countries like Nigeria.

"Actually Malaysia has been a hero and we have sympathy that Malaysia and its system seem to be under attack from the Western media," she added.

"If this matter is raised, it should not be seen as an interference but rather expression of concern.

"We in Nigeria had been grateful for the concern shown by our foreign colleagues about the situation in our country ... they are concerned for us as fellow human beings," she added.

The Star news editor Wong Chun Wai said the Malaysian Press appreciated the concern of their colleagues from Commonwealth countries on matters pertaining to upholding democracy and Press freedom.

"However I appeal that before you pass judgment on Malaysia and the Malaysian Press, I would like you to really ask yourself with great sincerity how much you know about Anwar's case.

"Is it just based on CNN, CNBC and wire services reports? I will appreciate if you make an effort by speaking to local journalists and people on the streets and the people who voted the Government to power and they may have a different perspective on the issue," he added.

The three-day forum which was attended by 65 editors from 36 Commonwealth countries ended yesterday.

The participants will leave for Kuala Lumpur tomorrow to attend the Commonwealth Press Union's biennial conference on Monday.

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