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Junk bond status of US diplomacy and political wisdom

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THE United States Vice-President Al Gore worships democracy. And as befits his name, the god of democracy that he worships is extremely gore-like.

That may be one reason why Gore's speech at the Apec Business Advisory Council summit dinner on Nov 16 was an implicit incitement to violence.

Consider what Gore said: "People will accept sacrifice in a democracy, not only because they have had a role in choosing it, but because they rightly believe they are likely to benefit from it."

He also described supporters of the "reformasi" movement in Malaysia as "brave".

As the vice-president of a country that professes to be the touchstone of democracy, I would like to ask Gore: Are massive demonstrations that carry a strong probability of blood and gore the appropriate instrument to achieve a change in government? Is Gore now suggesting the electoral process - previously a benchmark used to determine a country's democratic credentials - is secondary, if not inconsequential?

Gore's speech assumes democracy is close to extinction in Malaysia.

If this assumption is correct, why are opposition parties like the DAP and PAS confident - not just quietly confident but overwhelmingly so - they can deny the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, a victory in the next general election?

At the very least, the two opposition parties are confident of victory at State, if not at federal level.

Is the confidence shown by the DAP and PAS misplaced?

If their confidence is well grounded, does this not suggest that democracy has taken root in Malaysia?

It may not be quite the same as that in the US. However, both share one fundamental similarity: democracy contains the potent seeds of change - of leaders, governments and legislature.

If change can be affected peacefully through the ballot box and if voters and opposition parties in Malaysia are well aware of this possibility, do Malaysians require a primer on democracy?

The US Government is to be lauded for its brave attempt to shape its foreign policy in accordance with principles of morality.

In practice, however, its foreign policy has been at sharp variance with morality.

Apart from being inconsistent, more often than not, US foreign policy has been tilted in favour of strategic, economic and pragmatic considerations.

Undoubtedly, there are instances where US quiet support for democratic processes has been helpful.

However, there have also been instances where US foreign policy has resulted in active intervention in a country's political process.

The results have not always proved to be a success, possibly because of serious misjudgments of situations and/or political leaders.

Indeed, some analysts may argue that if the US Government had to be rated on its record of active intervention in developing countries - for example, by installing a favoured person in power, by overthrowing a leader whom the US regarded as inimical to its interests or by ignoring the electoral results because the victor was unacceptable - its rating may well be near junk bond status.

CONSIDER this: In March 1970, the US believed Cambodia would be better

off without Prince Sihanouk whose regime, the US believed, was riddled with corruption.

(In the 1970s, crony capitalism had not become part of the US Government's lexicon).

Acting on this high moral ground and confident of its assessment, the CIA encouraged an army-backed coup led by General Lon Nol, whose only claim to fame was the fact his name spelt the same backwards and forwards.

Although the Lon Nol regime did not demonstrate a noticeably higher standard of probity than Prince Sihanouk's, it enjoyed massive US support. But that support failed to prevent the subsequent victory of the Khmer Rouge and the onset of the "killing fields" in Cambodia.

Two million deaths later (a conservative estimate), the US decided to support the reinstatement of Prince Sihanouk as King of Cambodia in June 1993.

This was in recognition of the fact that the man the US had actively sought to overthrow 23 years ago was now the only one with the moral authority and stature to restore stability in the strife-torn kingdom.

Consider also past events in Iran.

In 1953, the Shah of Iran was deposed in a coup led by the then Prime Minister Dr Mossadeq, a man Washington and London perceived as a threat to western oil interests in Iran. With tremendous efficiency and promptness, the CIA organised a coup that led to the re-installation of the Shah a few weeks later.

Unfortunately for the US, the Shah was overthrown in 1979 by forces unleashed by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

The US response to the Iranian revolution was singular. Concerned about American embassy staff held hostage in Teheran, the US Government refused to provide refuge for the ailing monarch it had once restored to power and had courted so assiduously thereafter.

Needless to say, while the Shah remained in power, no US president or vice-president publicly lectured the Shah on human rights and democracy.

These examples are cited not as a critique of US foreign policy but to underline the fact that US has no monopoly on political wisdom.

With the benefit of hindsight, its misjudgment in Cambodia proved to be a tragedy for the kingdom. Given the US Government's capacity for misjudgement, I would argue its interests would be best served if it abstained from imposing its views on democracy, politics and governance on the people of Malaysia.

I concede Malaysia is not Utopia. But it is misconceived to compare this country with Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia.

Admittedly, some of the criticism levelled against Malaysia are justified; we Malaysians make no claim to perfection.

In fact, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself has acknowledged mistakes in government policy and the need for reform.

Issues regarding government policy, politics or personalities should be discussed and debated in the appropriate fora, whether in Malaysia or in other countries.

While these issues may be debated and discussed, the point is this: all these issues - including the issue of whether Dr Mahathir is an appropriate leader for this country - can and should be determined by Malaysians only.

Furthermore, these issues should be decided through the quiet but irrefutable power of the ballot box. Not through the newsprint or the electronic media, whether domestic or foreign.

Not through street demonstrations, no matter how much support these demonstrations command. And not through verbal assaults.

I suspect most Malaysians are like myself. We are tired of demagogues,

demonstrations and disruptions in our lives.

As a Malaysian, I have a simple request to make to Gore. Let us decide our own destiny in peace.

Give us credit that we know who to chose as our leader, how to choose a leader and why he should be chosen to lead.

What we don't need on the streets of Kuala Lumpur is blood and gore.