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Mahathir-Book

MAHATHIR'S BOOK A COLLECTION OF FIVE ESSAYS, INCLUDING ON NEP

By: Wan A Hulaimi

LONDON, 25 June (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's book "The Way Forward", to be launched in the presence of Baroness Thatcher here on July 7, is a collection of five essays bound in a handsome 133-page hardback edition whose cover design is attributed, rather mystifyingly, to 'Black Sheep'.

Of these essays, the most important in the light of developments in Malaysia in the last decade, are the ones covering the New Economic Policy even if the NEP itself is not being spoken about much these days in the euphoria of the 'Tiger economy' days.

Now that the 'tiger' is for the time being indisposed, the NEP and its basic thinking may come to the fore yet again, so it is timely that its aetiology and philisophy are examined once again by someone who is well qualified to do so.

Mahathir prefaces his opening essay on the NEP with a quotation from Aristotle, "Where some people are very wealthy and others have nothing, the result will be either extreme democracy or absolute oligarchy, or despotism will come from either of those excesses."

Having thus set out the fear as so succintly expressed by an old sage, the book opens at a tragic point in recent Malaysian history, the 1969 racial troubles. Mahathir says that bad blood between the Malays and the Chinese was due in part to their 'not knowing each other' because of the divide and rule policy of the British colonial government.

It was this which awoke the Alliance leaders and some of the opposition to the realisation that 'economic imbalances between the races were an important contributory factor to poor race relations' and to their reasoning that this economic disparity could be removed even if ethnic, language and cultural differences were a different proposition altogether.

The NEP was not meant to rob Ah Seng to pay Ahmad, but 'a levelling up rather than a levelling down'. Here Mahathir grabs at the opportunity to take a swipe at Communism which violently expropriated the property of the capitalists, and socialism, which preferred a less radical mixture of nationalisation and punitive taxes on the wealthy, but expropriation nevertheless.

Socialism, if not Communism, was long regarded as a very respectable political creed by the 'pontificating West', surely they must also accord more respect to the concept and achievement of the NEP?

This is Mahathir's view point, and one which he argues forcefully: Although he says in the earlier part of the book that the NEP was formulated quite independently - and indeed without knowledge of - steps towards 'affirmative action' in the US, on page 81 he states that it was in fact 'roughly an embodiment of the affirmative action approach formulated in the USA'.

Herein lies the great social and moral dilemma of our time: is it desirable to have a 'level playing field' where all have an equal chance, or is it better to help the disadvantaged on their feet by discriminating in their favour?

Mahathir is unequivocally in favour of the second option, and his argument that the level playing field is a concept that at once begs many questions is certainly a convincing one.

But what of the poor Chinese, Indians, Sikhs and so on? In short, what of the poor and underprivileged non-Bumiputeras?

Here his answer is illuminating:

"The NEP was not about reversing the distribution of wealth between the races. It aimed at achieving an equitable distribution at all levels between the different communities. There had to be proportionately the same percentages of rich and poor Bumiputeras as there were rich and poor non-Bumiputeras."

Mahathir believes that although the NEP has not completely removed the economic disparities between the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras, it certainly has made the differences less glaring.

The restructuring is not over even if the NEP ended in 1990 to be replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP). The emphasis is now on quality rather than quantity.

Continuing his argument for the restructuring of Malaysian society, Mahathir says that even though there is now a growing Bumiputera middle class, the proportion is still not right with most of the middle class housing estates still owned by non-Bumiputeras.

'Equity has not been achieved in terms of housing,' he says when talking about growth and equity.

Stating with some satisfaction that the 'critics have been proved wrong', Mahathir typically urges Malaysians to ignore them with confidence.

Mahathir then states the ultimate aim of the NEP and the NDP:

"The policy, modified to suit the prevailing political and economic condition, will continue to be implemented until the Bumiputeras and the non-Bumiputeras lose their fear of each other and achieve the true unity of Bangsa Malaysia, or a fully united and ethnically integrated Malaysian nation, living in harmony, and full and fair partnership."

Although "The Way Forward", a self-regarding collection of essays written with positive undertones, contrasts with "The Malay Dilemma", written when Mahathir was in the political wilderness, there are themes here that recur in both.

The self-confidence of the Bumiputeras had been undermined by the British colonial masters and needs to be restored, and Mahathir intends to restore this with Vision 2020, his blueprint for Malaysia's advancement towards fully developed status, as the jacket proclaims.

The book contains mild criticisms (if criticism they are) of Tunku Abdul Rahman and other Alliance leaders as being 'sanguine' about the racial disharmony that was the undertow of their time; and Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister, believed that 'if (economic) disparities could be corrected, the Malays and the other Bumiputeras would be able to live together with the non-Bumiputeras in peace'.

He and other Malay leaders were 'not too ambitious' and decided simply to restructure the economy so that Bumiputeras, who formed 56 per cent of the population, would have 30 per cent of the nation's economic wealth.

This book represents the views of one man who is regarded by many as Malaysia's most successful Prime Minister so far, and about whom strong opinions have been expressed both for and against.

It is characteristically radical in view point, as shown say, in the author's view about the US Constitution vis-a-vis affirmative action, a view which would reduce many a Constitutional lawyer to severe apoplexy.

Mahathir expresses himself better than his speechwriters allow him to do on many occasions, and this is evidenced by this clearly written and well argued book, even if some parts can be puzzling and that it could do with an index.

As an example of its puzzling aspect, is affirmative action really a form of 'over-correction' as stated on page 71?

In "The Way Forward" is found the views and philosophy of one man and his assessments of his achievements so far, and while his own views have

been expressed, it is for the historians to make their judgments later in a wider perspective and with the usual benefit of historical hindsight.

As normally is the fate of books of this nature, events tend to overtake some of the positions taken, and it is a great pity that at launch it cannot also incorporate Mahathir's views on the current economic melt-down, his views on currency speculation, and that great level playing field that the current vigour towards 'globalisation' is supposed to bring about.

It is hoped that these matters will be gathered in another book that is even now being written.

"THE WAY FORWARD", by Mahathir bin Mohamad; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London;pp.133; 16.00 pounds.

--BERNAMA

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