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Malaysia stands tall

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1998 has been arguably the most challenging year for Malaysia and its people since World War II. We have faced one of the worst economic crises since independence, and our democracy has been called into question.

Malaysians have seen their country and leaders on the cover of such magazines as Newsweek, Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek and similar publications, more often this year than perhaps in the last 10 years put together.

Admittedly, the publicity has not all been good; most has been bad, at least in international newspapers and magazines.

The question is, why so much fuss over a country of 22 million people? A country which, 10 years ago, no one outside the region could place on the map or claim to have heard of?

The main reason is that Malaysia, led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, plays a much larger role in the international arena than its size indicates.

For many years. Malaysia has been not just a leading member of Asean, but also of the Non-aligned Movement, the Commonwealth, and the Group of 15, to name a few.

However, much of the country's focus this year has been on the economic crisis. Even our foreign policy has been geared towards economic recovery.

"Our challenge was to recover the confidence in Malaysia, to reassure and convince foreign investors that our fundamentals are still strong and we are able to recover from the crisis without the help of the International Monetary Fund," says Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Abdul Khalid, Deputy Secretary-General I of the Foreign Ministry.

Dr Mahathir should take credit for much of this success. As Malaysians have witnessed over the past year, the country would have experienced more serious consequences had we adhered to IMF policies.

Lately, Dr Mahathir's idea of reflating the economy and stimulating growth has gained acceptance even with the IMF. Thailand and South Korea have been allowed to run their country at a five per cent deficit and lower interest rates, to reflate their domestic economies.

Even Dr Mahathir's calls to restructure the financial architecture, review the IMF, and have more transparency and regulation in the movement of short-term capital flow, have gained acceptance from many countries, some of which were highly sceptical when he first mooted these ideas.

The two largest economies, Japan and the United States, have begun discussing ways to regulate short-term capital flow, and calling for greater transparency and accountability in the way the IMF is run.

While we were criticised for our beliefs, we continued to bring up our ideas in other fora. An initial lack of acceptance did not prevent Malaysia from explaining its point of view. In every international forum, we talked of the damage to short-term capital flow, our resistance to an IMF bail-out, and our strong economic fundamentals. In this we have been successful, and it has led to greater acceptance of our perspective.

Perhaps the best example of Malaysia's standing in the international community is that we were voted in with an overwhelming majority, of 174 out of 176 votes, to the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term beginning in 1999.

According to Datuk N. Parameswaran, Deputy Secretary-General II of the Foreign Ministry, this shows we are viewed with high regard and that

Malaysia's position in international affairs has always been considered rational and moderate.

This will be the third time Malaysia is on the UN Security Council. The first was in 1965, then we split the term with the former Yugoslavia. The second term was in 1989.

Our previous stint on the Security Council, says Parameswaran, showed that we can assist, and proved we can handle ourselves. He credits Dr Mahathir's vision for Malaysia's playing a bigger role on the international scene than its geographical size would seem to warrant.

Malaysia has played an active peacekeeping role within the UN as far back as 1960, when it sent troops to the Congo. Since then we have contributed troops to the Western Sahara, Mozambique, Namibia and Angola, to name a few.

At the height of the problems in Bosnia and Somalia, Malaysia contributed the seventh largest peacekeeping force to the UN.

"When western countries wanted to remove themselves from Somalia, we felt countries should contribute to maintaining peace and security. We think it is an honour being asked to participate in these peacekeeping operations, despite the expense and loss of life they may incur," says Parameswaran.

He explains that countries cannot simply decide to volunteer their troops, but must be requested by the UN to contribute because they are acceptable.

Through the years, Malaysia has also contributed in other ways. Malaysia has held the chairmanship of the Group of 77, has been President of the UN General Assembly, chaired the Commission on Human Rights, and played host to a variety of meetings, from Asean, the G15, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government, to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

Recently, Malaysia called urgent meetings of NAM and the Organisation of Islamic Conference, to condemn US and British air strikes against Iraq. NAM issued a statement calling for the immediate end to all military strikes, and for continued efforts aimed at a peaceful settlement under the auspices of the Security Council.

At the OIC meeting, Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Datuk Hasmy Agam, said in his statement: "History would condemn us if we did or said nothing, especially when other groups, including many non-Muslims, have denounced the attacks.

"As a matter of principle, Malaysia does not support and cannot condone the use of force in the conduct of interstate relations."

Ghazzali says: "Malaysia is a country which has shown that it is guided by pragmatic, balanced and mature perceptions and analyses of issues. It is not ideological or partisan. It is reliable, people value our judgment, and we are not a vassal. Despite its size, the country's contribution to the world arena is overwhelming.

"Of course we have strong views that are reflective of the South, but we also have strong links and views with the North, for instance in areas like globalisation, multimedia, and trade and investment liberalisation."

Malaysia also continues to promote South-South co-operation, which has been one of the country's policies for a long time, especially since Dr Mahathir has been Prime Minister.

This is one way of making friends and helping friends. Having better friends encourages two-way trade and investment. It has opened not only the economic door, but political ones as well.

"There is solidarity in the countries of the South, both in economics and politics. Our experiences are more relevant. Malaysia does not assume that we are superior just because we are better off. It is a two-way partnership, and we want to keep it that way," says Parameswaran.

The crisis, he adds, has affected our ability to host more students from other countries, but some developed countries have offered to assist in bringing students to Malaysia.

On the seemingly bad rap Malaysia has received concerning the issue of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Wisma Putra has replied and tried to explain bilaterally to many countries which have expressed their concern.

Parameswaran explains: "They, with the exception of one or two countries, realise that it is our problem and that we are dealing with it.

"There is a Vietnamese proverb that says: 'A hundred times talking is not as good as one time seeing'. So despite Malaysia's attempts to explain the real situation, many foreigners feel Malaysia is in flames.

"Malaysia will continue to play an active role on the international scene, especially now we are on the Security Council. We will be more visible than we have been, because we plan to play a contributive role. There is no reason to think we will go down."

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