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Reforming process and national pride

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OF late, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said more than once that it is in our interest that our neighbours enjoy peace and prosperity.

On May 13, 1998 racial riots broke out in Jakarta and in other Indonesian cities.

History was repeating itself because on May 13, 1969, racial riots had broken out in Kuala Lumpur.

Like the Malays of 1969, the native Indonesians realised that the wealth of the country was in Chinese hands while they remained poor in their own country after 50 years of independence.

We learnt our lesson by the implementation of the New Economic Policy so that the Malays in large numbers are now better educated and trained in commerce, finance and industry. Economically, the Malays can now be said to be at par with the Chinese.

In the process, we developed a very large and growing middle class consisting of all the races in the country.

As Dr Mahathir said recently, there is no reason now for the Malays to burn shops and cars because the Malays too now own shops and cars.

In the early years of Indonesia's independence, a survey found that Indonesia's potential mineral and natural resources exceeded that of the United States and with a smaller population.

The irresistible conclusion of the survey must surely be that Indonesia today should have been a world economic power surpassing that of the US and Japan.

What then went wrong? To find the answer, I attended the public lecture on "Democracy and Reformation in Indonesia", delivered by Dr Amien Rais at Universiti Malaya recently.

Dr Aimen is a professor in political science at Indonesia's Gadjja Mada University. He obtained his doctorate degree from the University of Chicago in the US. He is also the acknowledged leader of 28 million Indonesian Muslims of the Muhammadiyah movement.

An obvious intellectual, his lecture was extempore in Bahasa Indonesia laced with quotations from the Quran and in English to emphasise a particular economic or political concept. In some quarters, he is regarded as a possible next President of Indonesia.

Not surprisingly he attributed Indonesia's economic problems to CNN (corruption, cronyism and nepotism) which were compounded by the political system.

The nation's wealth and economic power were concentrated in the hands of a few, mainly Chinese and some native Indonesians, the native element being largely held by PPP (Putra Putri President).

In sum, what Dr Amien said was that the nation's wealth had not been fairly distributed. In particular, he cited the case of Irian Jaya whose rich mineral resources had been exploited but the revenues earned were not ploughed back to develop the province. Its people had remained primitive and still dressed in loin-cloth.

Indonesia has many universities to which we send our students. At least one of our Cabinet Ministers received his tertiary education there. There is, therefore, no impediment to develop a large middle class as a bastion of economic and political stability.

There are many very well-educated Indonesians but both in the private

and public sectors they are poorly paid. During one of my visits to Indonesia, a legal officer of the Department of Justice offered to follow me to Malaysia as a maid when she heard how much I was paying my cook!

Of greater concern to Dr Amien is the possible disintegration of the republic.

President Sukarno, Indonesia's founding father, was an engineer by training but instead of building roads and bridges he built a nation of the world's largest Muslim population, uniting more than a hundred million people (now 220 million) of diverse cultures and languages living on more than 13,000 islands.

He made the Indonesians take pride in their heritage, a single national language, the Pancasila and sovereignty.

Internationally, Sukarno stood tall with Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia, the greats of the non-aligned nations of his time.

According to Dr Amien, Indonesia today is in the same situation as Yugoslavia after the death of Tito, with the country breaking up into several republics on ethnic and religious divisions.

A similar situation arose in Russia after the collapse of communism with the former Soviet Union breaking up into 15 separate independent republics. In both countries, a strong central government had kept the country together.

Similarly in Indonesia, a strong military-backed government in Jakarta has kept the country together. The over-centralised government, however, has spawned secessionist movements in various parts of the country.

Dr Amien said that to prevent disintegration of the republic, political power should be decentralised to the province and the economy restructured to enable every province to develop economically.

As the lecture and dialogue session came to a close, an Indonesian in the audience pleaded with Dr Amien to restore Indonesia's pride because he said "kami sekarang sudah malu! (we are now ashamed!)".

As neighbours, we hope and pray that the ongoing reforming exercise will restore Indonesia to peace and prosperity.

(END)