

06/10/1998

Western media should be punished if disregard for fair play continues

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THE Western media have their own global agenda i.e. defending the free market and its attendant "free flow of capital".

This is understandable. Their very survival depends on following where the US and Western capital goes.

Without a free flow of capital, especially the short-term "hot money" type, the demand for information from this global media network will diminish.

They certainly are not happy that we are taking steps that can threaten the foundation of the global business.

They do want other nations to realise the way we do that "hot money" can play havoc on national economies unless properly controlled and regulated. The West does not want regulation.

We acknowledge that "hot money" may not come to Malaysia for the time being. And if it remains a destabilising factor, we should be courageous enough to say no to it.

However, we believe that long-term foreign direct investments will not be discouraged as in the case of Blue Circle Group increasing its investment in the cement industry in Malaysia. Foreign companies like Shell and Nestle have been in Malaysia for a long time and will continue to grow with the country. Much as you may not like to hear it, these are the facts and a more balanced view.

* Why are there two standards - one for the West and one for Asia. The US has always lowered interest rates in a crisis. During the junk bond crisis, the Federal Reserve lowered interest rates.

Very recently interest rates were again lowered as Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan feared that the Asian and Russian crises may spread to the US. So why ask us to tighten credit when the West will do the opposite? What is the agenda?

* Last week, the Federal Reserve forced several investment banks to bail out a failed hedge fund for fear that its large exposure to the banking system may pose a systemic risk. This, simply put, is cronyism and a bailout.

Why have the Western media not screamed "cronyism" and "bailout" at Greenspan instead of levelling such accusations at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at every opportunity? Two standards and two sets of rules? We all live in glass houses so please don't throw stones.

* After the dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and especially after his arrest, the Western media rained "dictator" criticisms on Dr Mahathir and are suggesting that Anwar may be innocent. Why pre-judge?

As a matter of fact, you will discover that many Malaysians, who know more of the facts than the Western media, think otherwise. They believe Dr Mahathir has acted responsibly as a gentleman and statesman.

* It is obvious that CNBC has been pro-Anwar right from the beginning. Why should a media company take sides? Its business is to report the news and not influence opinion of the masses.

The fact of the matter is that the boss has sacked his ex-deputy and arrested him for reasons which will be known when the case goes to trial. After all, President Bill Clinton has to answer to Congress for his sexual misdemeanour; so let the case be heard.

CNBC gave Anwar a lot of airtime for interviews, made suggestions that people here are unhappy with his removal and that Dr Mahathir is

intolerant and a dictator. I am sure some are unhappy but if you take the trouble to talk to enough people, you will realise that there are a lot of happy people in this country and an overwhelming groundswell of support for Dr Mahathir.

In his own interest, Anwar has incited demonstrations. At this time of economic difficulty, this is not in Malaysia's interest; so does he really love his country or is he interested only in saving himself by any means and methods, regardless of the costs and damage to the country?

* CNBC's portrayal of the recent demonstrations has been grossly misleading. Whilst it is correct that a few thousand of Anwar's supporters demonstrated, there was no violence. More importantly, life was normal in all other parts of the country. In fact, most evenings in Bangsar, a fashionable suburban centre in Kuala Lumpur, people partied till late every night.

We appreciate that CNBC is in the business of selling news but please don't sell disinformation to the extent that it affects our country's image abroad. Like every country, we need tourists so don't do us injury to suit your own interest.

It should be noted that our neighbour, Singapore, especially under Lee Kuan Yew, has long advocated and still practises a policy of strict supervision of the international foreign media in terms of what they are allowed to write in relation to the internal affairs and politics of the republic.

The golden rule is that foreign publications are not allowed to write untruths, cast aspersions on government policies, make any comment on any internal issue with intention to mislead, and generally to render opinions on any internal policy which are speculative and not deemed to be responsible statements.

Singapore has a long history of demanding and enforcing strict discipline against the foreign media. Any intransigence will bring forth immediate and harsh retaliation by the Government.

Errant foreign publications may be banned or suffer severe restrictions on their circulation. With a severely curtailed circulation, these foreign publications will lose money in Singapore; so they will have to toe the official line and respect the domestic policy of their host country if they want to continue to distribute and sell their publications.

Major publications such as the Asian Wall Street Journal, Far Eastern Economic Review, International Herald Tribune, etc, have experienced this form of retaliation by the Singaporean Government. From time to time, some of these publications and their writers have also been taken to court.

Furthermore, the Singaporean Government will not hesitate to arrest and detain local and foreign parties under the republic's Internal Security Act if their actions are deemed prejudicial to national interests. For example, several members of a local religious group were arrested in the mid-80s under the ISA for anti-government activities deemed to be against national interest and had to make public confessions on television before they were released.

In the late 80s, a well-known journalist for the Asian Wall Street Journal working and living in Singapore was given advance information that he would be arrested under the ISA for persistently writing negative, critical and factually incorrect articles on Singapore's newly-formed second board of the stock exchange (Sesdaq).

This journalist left Singapore before he could be arrested and moved to Kuala Lumpur where he continued to work for AWSJ until he left for Washington in 1994 to take on an assignment for a Malaysian publication.

Last year, a visiting American lecturer at the National University of Singapore wrote a critical article on the Singaporean Government and

published it in the International Herald Tribune. The lecturer fled Singapore before he could be arrested and the Government sued the Tribune.

Singapore's apparent hard stand against irresponsible foreign publications can be justified on the grounds that the playing field is not level between the local media of small countries and international media companies. International media companies such as Time Warner own and control several publications including Time and Fortune, and have also merged with CNN, the global television news network which broadcasts round-the-clock.

The local media of Asian countries do not have the international circulation and audience to influence global opinion so they cannot be a threat to Western countries.

Even so, the media in this country are generally careful and responsible in their commentaries on the affairs of our neighbours and their leaders and they do not have the habit of passing irresponsible comments, making harsh judgments, trying to influence opinion and casting aspersions on Western leaders. This is very much part of the Asian culture where we are sensitive, tolerant and respectful of the interests of others.

Malaysians are generally aggrieved by CNBC's and AWSJ's sensationalist reports on Malaysia. Many would also ask of them to stop taking sides, stop being prejudiced, and, be fair to Dr Mahathir. Otherwise, we would urge the Malaysian Government to adopt Singapore-style "hardball" tactics with the Press where errant media companies and their reporters will be sued, have their circulation banned or restricted, and errant reporters detained under the ISA.

Furthermore, Malaysian companies will be forbidden from advertising in these media companies' publications. This way, they can't make fun of us and take our money at the same time.

What Malaysians are basically saying to foreign media companies is this - be fair and truthful in your reporting. We realise that you are big powerful corporations and giants like CNN and CNBC broadcast round-the-clock; so what you say and how you say it will influence the opinion of the world. Malaysia is a small country so the playing field is not level because whatever we may want to say would not be as effective as what you media giants report.

If the foreign media continue to ignore our pleas - our Government should ban those guilty ones from operating in the country. It is better to have no news than to have untruthful news.

In an unequal world we are justified in introducing some measures to provide some re-balancing so that we can minimise some of the inequality.

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