

16/09/1998

Liberal economic policy will continue

Zainul Arifin in New York

NEW YORK, Tues: Malaysia's liberal economic policy is not about to change just because former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is no longer in the Government.

Liberalisation has always been the Government's policy, and it is not Anwar that has been its chief promoter.

"I hate to disappoint you, but all of us are advocates of liberal policies," said International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

She was responding to a question from the audience at a trade investment seminar here yesterday with regard to Malaysia's commitment to a liberal economic policy following the sacking of Anwar.

Anwar had been perceived by many in the foreign business community as the most investor-friendly face in the Malaysian Government and the strongest champion of liberal trade.

She said all members of the Cabinet work as a team, including Anwar when he was in the Government work collectively towards whatever policy the Government might have.

Rafidah added that the Government's policy on liberalisation in accordance with the country's ability and situation remains.

She said she was quite perplexed at how foreigners could draw the conclusion that the Government's policy was dependent on Anwar.

"If one member of the team dies or gets sacked it does not cause a ripple as far as Government policies are concerned," she added.

She told the audience that Anwar's removal was at the discretion of the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and that it was carried out solely on evidence which are related to allegations of personal improprieties by the former Deputy Prime Minister.

Rafidah said there were compelling evidence to warrant his removal from the Government and Umno.

"What are the reasons? They've got nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with economic policies and nothing to do with differences of opinion."

She said, for example, she did not often agree with the Prime Minister, and neither did he with her views. But both of them try to convince the other on their points of view.

She said the perception the foreigners have on Anwar was perhaps due to him saying what they wanted to hear, and they in turn complementing him for doing so.

"But I have been long enough in the business and old enough to know at what level I can accept these praises," she said, adding that when she was praised, like everyone else, she would feel good.

But she said she would start to feel uncomfortable when these praises go sky high - "my goose pimples start to rise into big bumps and I try not to let them get to my head".

"Some people thrive on this hype. The more you praise these whizzkids the more whizzy they become...this unfortunately had happened to my dear former student Anwar," said Rafidah, who onced taught the former minister in the university.

Rafidah said Anwar was barking at the wrong tree by going around the country calling for reforms, and championing issues like human rights and justice.

"I wish he would just defend himself against the allegations."

After the seminar, Rafidah also received a letter expressing support for the Prime Minister in his handling of the Anwar affair from the Malaysian Association of America, a New York-based organisation whose members comprise of Malaysians working in the US.

The letter, which Rafidah said she would forward to Dr Mahathir, was presented by the association's chairman K.S. Bong and president Sam Chin.

(END)