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Clearing the air over foreign misconceptions

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THERE were times last year when I seriously feared for my sanity. This was when I listened to people pontificating about Malaysia and its leader. I could not believe we could possibly be talking about the same country or the same person - so far apart, sometimes opposed, were our perspective.

The only consolation was that invariably my "informant" had never set foot on Malaysian soil, certainly had never been within metres of the Prime Minister, let alone spoken with him directly, could not possibly know the man as he really is. This did not in any way deter them from judging him. With every mile one travels outside Malaysia, the distortions rush in.

I wrote recently about the knowledge gap that often separates us from the prevailing scepticism and of the dangers of ignorance. The worst kind is wilful ignorance, the kind that makes a person dogmatic, for dogma has its own arrogance. It also, I found, renders a person intellectually impregnable.

This piece is directed at the fair and open-minded. It is an attempt to set the record straight in certain areas of common misunderstanding. I do so humbly but with the advantage at least of being this side of the Pyrenees, of being close to the scene in all its disputed aspects. I shall also be indulging a little in my favourite pastime, which is intellectual streaking.

As a starting point, what precisely were the burning issues that induced the American Vice-President to flout the proprieties at the Apec dinner? His basic concern seemed to be with democracy. I too believe in democracy as a moral good, and as a workable system - despite its flaws - the best we have. It provides legitimate avenues for peaceful change and reform, guaranteed and protected by having to observe due process, without which an unbridled zeal for social overhaul gets out of hand and reform becomes revolution.

Malaysia, although some appear not to realise it, is a practising democracy based on the parliamentary system, Westminster style. Singapore and Malaysia are the only two countries in this part of the world to have held free and fair elections every five years without fail since independence. Some of our neighbours are being lauded at the moment, sometimes at our expense, for the vigour with which they are tackling their International Monetary Fund-prescribed reforms - notably taking steps towards a more democratic regime. We already have ours in place, and the others, truth to tell, are playing catch up.

Dr Mahathir moreover holds the mandate of the people. Whilst Government may not be perfect, it was voted in by a very large majority of Malaysians exercising their democratic choice. With 68 per cent of the votes in its favour and holding four-fifths of the seats in the House, it is moreover and self-evidently, a populist Government. Gore contemplating his own presidential bid ought to be green with envy. Seventy-per-cent of the people turned out to vote in the last Malaysian elections as opposed 38 per cent of the eligible votes cast in the recent US congressional and gubernatorial elections. These are important realities many, not only Gore, seem to ignore.

In fact, we derive much of our concept of democracy from one of Gore's compatriots. Abraham Lincoln defined Government as of the people, belonging to the people; and it is for the people to decide. Others have

no right, Soros included, to preach about changing a Government or a leadership not theirs to change. Ours may not be perfect. We are far from blameless. But it will be the ballot boxes that will have the final say, and that offer dissent its best opportunity.

The self same dissenters will not have to wait long for the general election. There is no need for impatience nor resort to other arbitrary and potentially destabilising methods. Reformasi, so far a movement of slogan chanting with no real agenda, has been invited to form a political party and contest for power and representation by legitimate means. I look forward to reading its manifesto. Anything else is sidestepping constitutional realities and rights.

Invidious and totally unwarranted comparisons have also been drawn with the Hitler and Stalin regimes "where merely holding elections did not preclude denying civil liberties". This simply does not apply here. I presume our detractors were referring to the Internal Security Act and alleged police brutality. The latter perception is no doubt prompted by sensational Press coverage more likely to come from Indonesia with whom Malaysia is bracketed in the undiscerning mind. Our demonstrations, with one abortive exception, have not turned violent. There have been no fatalities and no serious injuries except those inflicted on two plainclothes policemen. Malaysian protesters get wet, not dead. We merely disperse them with water cannons. We do so because they are breaking the law of unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace. Why do we have such a law rather more draconian than those elsewhere? Because we are a multi-racial society and we have to be extra vigilant not to stir racial tensions. The unspeakable savagery inflicted on the Chinese and the Christian minorities in Indonesian are a salutary lesson.

We in Malaysia can count ourselves lucky we had the New Economic Policy which removed the really glaring inequalities along ethnic lines that could have fanned economic resentment (and once did) exactly of the kind that led to the blood letting in Indonesia. But however peaceful our Malaysian demonstrations, they are still a breach of the peace and a dangerous road to take.

One call from Sungai Buloh prison would have dispersed them even more effectively than the water cannons and in the national interest, I would have liked that call to have come.

The main bone of contention here seems to be the ISA. In an ideal world it is of course abhorrent to detain a man without trial and the ability to do so is a dangerous weapon easy to abuse, especially for political ends. But it is not an ideal world. We have, as I have said, to be on guard against any form of tension that could turn ugly. "Ugly" in the Malaysian context takes on a racial dimension. The ISA is a means of defusing tension - of preventing demonstrations escalating by the simple expedient of temporarily removing the more recalcitrant and defiant trouble makers.

They are arrested one day - gleefully reported by CNN - and promptly released the next - pointedly ignored by CNN. Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim too was charged as quickly as possible. The real abuse is when a man is detained indefinitely without trial, as with the luckless Chia Thye Poh in Singapore, the world's longest-serving prisoner of conscience, just released after 32 years under the ISA. I don't recall hearing many voices raised in protest in all those years.

There is some selective myopia at work here. In China a man does get a trial, of a quick and summary kind, followed often by a quick execution. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are not exactly renowned for their democratic regimes. It does not preclude the protagonists of democracy and human rights from supporting them, with cruise missiles if necessary.

Instead the wrath of the righteous is turned on the rule of law in

Malaysia, which the current trial brings into the world spotlight. I am one who feels saddened and find regrettable the treatment Anwar appears to have received in jail. Compassion unfortunately often inhibits our ability to be dispassionate about the issues involved. We have to show faith in our institutions. These admittedly have been battered lately by human fallibility. They are bruised but intact. Due process is being observed. And the best news of late is the setting up of the Special Commission to do a better job of the investigation in which we all have a sincere interest.

Much has been made of that last-minute "change" in the charges for which Anwar is being held. I would have welcomed this even earlier as we seemed to be getting away from the point of law which concerned allegations of corruption, not sodomy. That would come later. I'd also like as a stickler for language to point out that the charges were "amended" not "changed". I turn to the Oxford Dictionary still in my admittedly biased view, the best, and which replaced my childhood security blanket long ago. It becomes my comfort factor now. The OED defines "amend" as "making better" - "making an improvement", not making different.

The Commission is to conduct its enquiries in public. The trial is reported faithfully, indeed verbatim. So much for accusations that we lack transparency. Foreign journalists - no friends of ours - are nevertheless allowed to come and go freely, knowing they will write freely about us and all too often scurrilously. Are Malaysians denied the same freedom of speech? Have you ever been to an Instant Cafe performance? Did you read Lim Guan Eng's recent letter in the New Straits Times? Or for that matter, Marina Mahathir's spirited articles? Harakah's circulation has soared of late. I can't think why in professional terms, given the penchant for diatribes of the gutter Press variety. Malaysia is not just a democracy but a spirited democracy if coffee house talk, cocktail party chatter and those ubiquitous conferences have anything to do with it. To say nothing of the formation of Adil, the Justice Party and the sudden proliferation of protest groups.

I do not propose to get embroiled in the controversy surrounding Dr Mahathir. That is matter for a later objective but balanced profile needed to do justice to the subject. But for now we need to depersonalise the attack on Malaysia and concentrate not on one individual but again on the issues. The judgmental area, in any case, is not a matter of personality, temperament or even political style - it will be the success or failure of the economic strategy to effect recovery.

Being a financial virgin, I'd like to take a less orthodox tack here. Before we get swamped by all the figures and the statistics that vary bewilderingly according to source, I'd like to point out some of the real assets we have. These, as usual, have been much criticised as grandiose, extravagant, monuments to self-esteem. I refer of course to some of our more conspicuous infrastructure achievements. Far from being ego-trips, they are truly productive. The North-South Expressway and the second crossing to Singapore are vital links opening up the entire country. KLIA is commendably forward-looking, preparing us for the new millennium and geared for growth. And who can deny the creativity and the pragmatism of the Multimedia Super Corridor?

These are real assets. We built them before the crisis hit. They are existing. You cannot with a push of a button obliterate them - as a similar button could wipe out the currency. What do they say? That they put us ahead of the region in infrastructure. That they spell stability. That they demonstrate our capability in meeting international standards. The North-South Expressway was built to those exacting standards, in just five years. They tell us above all that Malaysia is ready for the 21st

century.