

06/02/1999

NGOs must be part of the drive towards Vision 2020

Tan Sri Ramon V. Navaratnam

OUR Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stated in his 1999 New Year message that: "God willing, if we remain resolute, maintain peace and stability and co-operate to ensure the success of measures to revive the economy, we will succeed and our independence will continue to be meaningful."

This message outlines his and our Government's philosophy for getting us out of the recession.

This is right, but we will need to do much more to revive the economy on a strong and sustainable basis and to ensure that our independence continues to be even more meaningful to us all.

Firstly, on the global front, we have to accept the reality that some powerful western powers will step up their efforts to increase their economic and political power even at the expense of developing countries such as Malaysia.

At the recent World Economic Conference in Davos, no consensus could be reached to regulate currency speculators, who have wrought havoc on many developing countries.

Indeed, industrial countries have dominated for hundreds of years through colonialism and will continue to do so through economic imperialism.

Through economic dominance, they will also aim to control us politically.

There are those who will disagree with this theory for their own reasons. But let us ask them - how can the industrial countries continue to dominate 80 per cent of the world's wealth with only 20 per cent of the world's population?

How can the rich countries continue to maintain such disgusting differences in consumption, when according to the Commission on Development of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, 15 per cent of the world's population in the industrial countries "account for 76 per cent of global consumption expenditures."

If these are the values of avarice and exploitation by some rich industrial countries, let us recognise that no amount of open criticism can change essentially western values. Leopards cannot change their spots.

The major rich industrial countries led by the American oligarchists have been severely embarrassed and hurt by the constant reminder of western greed, that they have reacted resentfully against Malaysia and other countries that are bold enough to expose them.

By continuing to openly attack verbally, some of these powerful industrial countries will continue use all means "to divide and control" and to attack us at every opportunity.

This is the main reason why Malaysia has been severely criticised in the western press.

Maybe we should follow the examples of the big and populous countries in the Third World, like Egypt, Indonesia, China and India. These countries also uphold their national integrity and sovereign rights. But they do it more quietly and subtly - and it pays off!

Secondly, it would be useful not to paint the whole western or industrial world with the same brush.

There are many small and middle size western countries that are also bullied by the rich powerful countries.

Even within the rich countries, there are millions who are exploited by the powerful minorities, who are the oligarchists.

For instance, only 225 of the world's richest people are estimated to have a combined wealth of over US\$1 trillion.

This is equal to the total annual incomes of the poorest 47 per cent or 2.5 billion of the world's population according to the International Movement for a Just World.

Surely our non-governmental organisations and those in both the rich and powerful countries could work more closely together, to contain the excessive wealth and power and the exploitation by these oligarchists who cause so much misery to billions of human beings on our God-given bountiful planet.

Surely, the world's greatest religions could unite to fight economic exploitation and to promote a more equitable just world, with greater commitment within three rich powerful countries.

On the home front, we need to develop smart partnerships between the Government and the non-government organisations to co-operate more effectively for national unity.

There is a lack of understanding on both sides, as to how we should enhance the social and economic well-being of all Malaysians.

For the new millennium we could strengthen the consultations and consultative machinery between the Government and non-governmental organisations, to achieve the aspirations embodied in Vision 2020.

There is no point in regarding some NGOs as if they are antagonists to our national aspirations. NGOs are also patriotic but they want to see justice and equity.

So justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done.

The independent commission of inquiry investigating Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's injuries and its being open to the public, is, therefore, most welcome.

Secondly, our independence will be more meaningful if we can enhance good governance.

Some of the principles of good governance that could be further strengthened could be as follows:

\* Aim for a more sustainable rate of economic growth of say 5-7 per cent. Higher economic growth as we have experienced in the past, can cause strains and wastage in the economy.

\* Give higher priority to reducing poverty and providing better education, health and other social facilities that will directly benefit the lower income groups.

Our priorities have to be modified. We may become too business-friendly at the cost of being less people-friendly!

\* Adopt stronger policies to produce more food in order to reduce the alarming rise in, especially for, food prices. This will strengthen social stability and national unity.

Otherwise, rising food prices will cause severe social strains and erode stability. We cannot afford it.

\* Improve the quality of the civil service and its implementation capacity, to ensure better public service by government agencies. There are still too many complaints of inefficient and indifferent public services.

This will strengthen the co-operation between the Government and the public, to ensure the success of the Government's policy measures.

Our new Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been given the challenging task of making his department and the rest of the civil service more "people friendly".

I hope this means they will also be more efficient. There is no merit in

being just friendly, if the quality of service is poor, and well below the expectations of those from the lower income groups who have no strings to pull.

\* Take stronger action to combat corruption, cronyism and capitalistic excesses which are universal weaknesses but which can be far more damaging in developing countries with weaker institutions and fewer checks and balances.

We can attack these scourges more successfully by ourselves without foreign interference.

\* In order to better prepare ourselves to face the challenges of the 21st century next year, let us become more competitive and meritocratic.

Otherwise we will not achieve our Vision 2020 on time. We can talk about wanting to be world class, but we have to work harder and smarter, otherwise we will not 'walk the talk'.

\* Government has to recognise the growing public aspirations and trends for a faster pace of change and for a more open and equitable society.

Government has also to lead in the changes that are necessary for a better Malaysia.

Otherwise the Government will lose touch with the rakyat and lose its focus and support which is so necessary at this time!

\* The recent Cabinet reshuffle will strengthen confidence in the management of the Malaysian economy. Abdullah Badawi, as a former senior civil servant and with a 'Mr Clean' image, would be able to do much to raise the efficiency and implementation capacity of the Government.

Economic and financial issues will now not be directly under the purview of the Prime Minister, but under the immediate responsibility of the new First Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin and his Second Finance Minister economist Datuk Mustapa Mohammad.

Their proven grasp and success in overcoming the previous recession will go a long way to accelerating economic recovery this time round too.

\* It is encouraging to see the Government has had considerable consultations with international fund managers, financial analysts and monetary leaders on our economic policies.

Together with financial advisers Salomon Smith Barney, we should be able to devise new exchange control policies that should be more acceptable to the international investors.

These foreign financial advisers should also help us to improve our poor image in the international financial markets. Why have they not achieved more so far?

\* The new policy and levies on portfolio capital should now have the broad support of the fund managers since they are fair and reasonable and even generous.

I would have thought that we could have come down harder on the short-term 'fly-by-night' portfolio investment manipulators.

It is not difficult to identify and get them to pay the price of the havoc they have caused us.

Genuine investors should be rewarded and manipulators should be penalised. The new levies are clever and most welcome.

With Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi as our new Deputy Prime Minister, confidence will grow even further. Succession is now assured and uncertainty is thus removed.

Datuk Seri Abdullah is expected to push for stronger measures, for more transparency, accountability and higher administrative efficiency.

All these changes will help achieve our Prime Minister's and our national aspirations, for more purposeful and more meaningful independence, as we recover economically and move into the 21st century.

(END)

