

01/11/2000

A shameful act by some Malaysians

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SOMETHING embarrassing almost happened when International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz led a trade investment mission here recently.

Among the literature in the information packages handed out to participants at the seminars at the New York Financial Centre downtown were pamphlets denouncing the Malaysian Government and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's administration.

It was not difficult to conclude that the pamphlets centred around Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from the Cabinet and his consequent conviction for corruption and sodomy.

The presence of the insidious pamphlets were discovered before the information packages were widely distributed and measures were taken immediately to remove them.

This was not the first time a deliberate attempt was made to discredit a Malaysian minister serving under the present leadership abroad. Dr Mahathir himself has been the target of demonstrations organised by Malaysians themselves overseas.

Elsewhere, reports from some websites maintained by those opposed to the ruling Government indicate parties have proudly proclaimed their successes in bad-mouthing the Malaysian Government overseas, and of the attention given by certain quarters in the US, Britain and Australia towards their cause.

Unfortunately, and perhaps unknowingly, in their desire to topple Dr Mahathir's government, these people are selling their souls and of other Malaysians in the process. Essentially, these groups want some form of pressure to be applied by the international community on Malaysia to force Dr Mahathir's administration to surrender its power, presumably to them.

In the case of Rafidah's trade mission here, by inserting the pamphlets in the information packages they hoped to deter investors from coming to Malaysia, using the economy as a pawn in their political game. At home, they displayed insincerity by saying their intentions were only to inform foreigners about what was happening in Malaysia. We all know the principal aim stinks of politics.

By deterring foreign investment, the groups hope Dr Mahathir's administration will be pressured from the economic perspective. Low foreign investment means less business, which in turn means less taxes to be collected and thus less revenue for the Government in power.

To follow the logic further: With less revenue, the Government will have little to spend, will not be able to fulfill much of its responsibilities, will have to shoulder the blame and eventually be rejected in the next election.

It seems simple: Cut the foreign investment pipeline, choke the ruling Government and assume power. Or is it?

Investment concerns the economy, the economy concerns money and money concerns livelihood. Not of politicians and political parties alone, but for everyone.

None of the proud, anti-Dr Mahathir's administration groups have come out to reveal the possible backlash from their action. And one has got to be kidding if one says there isn't any.

To be fair, let us not bad-mouth the likes of the US, Britain or Australia and wonder what opportunities their businesses are looking for

in this adversity Malaysia is facing. Second-guessing is an ungentlemanly conduct.

Let's look only at the opposing groups and the possible consequences from their action.

Malaysia is a country dependent on foreign investment. Much has been done by the Government to attract foreign investors into the country, and much of the decade's over 8 per cent economic growth Malaysia chalked up before the 1997 economic crisis is attributable to earnings derived out of foreign investment.

Taxes and other revenues from the period of a vibrant foreign investment climate has enabled the country to press on with development, which no group, whatever their political leanings, can deny. The period has made it possible for almost everyone to have a job, for every children to go to school with a full stomach and for every household to have some form of savings for their old age.

Then the 1997 economic crisis struck and Malaysia, like many others in the region, was adversely affected. Suddenly, Malaysians faced the bleak prospect of losing their economic wealth and the future became uncertain.

It was fortunate that the crisis was short and that Malaysia was able to find a solution to protect its domestic economy, hence social structure, from the impact. For any Malaysian, again whatever their political leanings are, the fast recovery was more important than anything else. Whatever you may say, the pocket is always number one.

True, there was anxiety for a while with Anwar's dismissal and later arrest. But even more disturbing for many then was the fact that they were paying 13 per cent interest on their mortgage, about 120 per cent more for their imports and sky-high interest rates on their commercial borrowings.

No fiery or idealistic political speech could have repaired the troubled situation then. And certainly not any International Monetary Fund-style prescription.

The pamphlets "secretly" slotted in those information packages during Rafidah's mission here may not directly lead to economic events like those immediately after the 1997 crisis. But if halting foreign investment to Malaysia was its intention, the end result would be somewhat similar - a poorer Malaysia with no fewer than 22 million people of various races to feed and to provide for.

And as the situation gets tighter, the deals made by the groups with the foreign countries in their effort to win will come back with repercussions.

I don't know about others, but at least in the US, you don't cut deals and expect to just walk away from them without paying back.

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