

31/01/2000

Asia at the dawn of the millennium

Abdullah Ahmad

IT IS a great honour for me to be invited to be this year's distinguished speaker on two of your panels, "The Future of Asean and US Foreign Policy Towards Asia".

Harvard, like the US, is a world leader and this annual conference confirms the university's pre-eminent position besides providing a better understanding of South-East Asia in the US now and in the future.

Despite many gloomy predictions about Malaysia and open incitements by its foes before and during the November 1999 general elections, happily and fortunately, none materialised.

Though we suffered in terms of popular votes, we still won with a two-thirds majority.

The year 2000, I believe, will be good for Malaysia. Its economy will grow sufficiently (official estimates put growth at 5 per cent this year though private think-tanks estimate between 6 and 6.5 per cent).

Malaysia's quick recovery is the result of the Selective Capital Controls and its trade with the world, the US in particular.

Having said that the Government remains concerned about possible downside risks caused by events which are beyond our control such as high interest rates in the US, major corrections in Wall Street and the rising yen.

I would like to reiterate, all being well, the outlook for the Malaysian economy in 2000 remains buoyant as the cyclical recovery gains further strength. Other economies in the region are also turning around.

The Malaysian Government, under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is strong and stable and it shall remain so for as long as it remains moderate and acceptable to most Malaysians.

The choice before the electorate then, and in the future, is between the conservative Islamic party Pas and Umno, the middle-of-the-road party that has dominated the Government since independence 42 years ago.

Look forward to a real duel in the 11th General Elections in 2005, between paradise and purgatory, between economy and Islamic conservatism. Economic despair breeds aggressive Islam, and virulent nationalism in the case of others.

There is no political uncertainty in my country as far as I can see and determine. This will be confirmed during the Umno presidential election on May 11.

Dr Mahathir will retain his post even if he is challenged. The man to watch is Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, Dr Mahathir's current number two, who is being groomed by him to take over when he dies or decides to retire.

Abdullah has a hard act to follow. He has a major task to restore ideological, political, Islamic and moral rectitude among Umno members to stop the rot in the party.

It would certainly take a leader of considerable vision to steer the nation following Dr Mahathir's departure. Abdullah's supporters assert their man is capable even if colourless. Many are cautious, even anxious. Abdullah, I am confident, will be able to cope.

The original Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) of five members is now 10, bringing, for the first time in the history of the South-East Asia, all nations within the region into a single system of sorts.

Asean now has land borders with China and India making them immediate neighbours. The 10 Asean nations are at various stages of development. Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia are the poorest.

Indonesia, the most populous (and fourth most populous nation in the world) has one of the lowest per capita incomes.

East Timor started it; now Indonesia is being cursed by religious strifes and it does stir fears in many quarters about the disintegration of the sprawling archipelago.

Myanmar and Vietnam will or can present the problems facing Indonesia as evidence that only strong governments work in a region where democracy is a relatively new political institution.

What works well in one country does not automatically follow in another. The Asean Economic Crisis of 1997 was a tragedy.

After three years Asean economies are bouncing back. Two or three Asean Tigers will again roar. Certainly, Singapore which proved to be the most resilient among the 10.

The city-state is a virtual one-party nation but its leadership is as clean as politicians and government can be; and you should look forward to a Singaporean reformation - political and economic as it tries to be ahead of competition from its neighbours.

Malaysia, to be sure, is the other nation, also Thailand and perhaps the Philippines.

The signs are already in evidence. The redefined national plans, lessons learnt and globalisation would further broaden and deepen the quality of the lives of the people of these nations.

We have learned that capitalism has to be an honest system to work well.

A lack of corruption (honestly, you cannot realistically wipe out corruption in all its insidious manifestations), efficiency, more transparency and good governance create wealth and even if we are in favour of meritocracy and more entrepreneur creativity and activity we cannot just simply dismantle the policy of affirmative action which is to correct a gross economic imbalance and restructure society without causing social upheavals.

As a result of the affirmative action we have been successful in creating a degree of social cohesion that guarantees political stability which is essential for economic development and wealth creation.

Malaysia has succeeded because it has a strong, pragmatic and well-tested political leadership, committed to democracy, moderation and economic growth.

This is a Malaysian phenomenon that was and will remain a basic factor in the Malaysian success story.

Asean failed to respond to the East Timor crisis nor could it garner forces fast enough to make it an Asean operation instead of an Aussie exercise backed by the US and other Western nations.

This, notwithstanding, Asean has a future. The economic recovery taking place in the Asean region-faster than originally expected - should help smooth some bilateral troubles between Malaysia and Singapore and between us and the Philippines.

I just could not imagine what the region would be without Asean and the world without the United Nations. We must continue to work harder to make ourselves relevant in the post - financial crisis Asia.

"People more often need to be reminded than to be informed." Dr Johnson was right, and never more than today.

"The end of the Cold War and what happened and are happening following the demise of communism, have forced us to relearn how to react to events and how to interpret them.

"We are now in an unprecedented period because for the first time ever

there is only one superpower, the US. There is no longer a notion of "balance of power" in global politics in the sense that existed a mere dozen years ago.

The question is will this situation persist?

I was born two-and-half years before the Second World War and went to school around the time the United Nations was founded.

I thought, then and now, the United Nations would be a useful instrument for building and maintaining international security and peace.

The United Nations was established based on agreement between the then five big powers - the US, USSR, Britain, France and China. Now, as I said earlier on, there is no balance of power.

The US is all-powerful and it comes as no great surprise that Washington has and will use pressures to gain political and economic advantages all over the world.

This has been confirmed by the Transparency International. What surprises us why did it take such a long time for Transparency International, supposedly a watchdog agency against abuses of power, to recognise the imperialistic ways of Uncle Sam?

Washington has and will use human rights to advance and sustain its hegemony, and many people believe there is no escape from American power politics, double standards and the politics of ends, not means.

My country and others know too well, the US will raise human rights, transparency, corruption and nepotism to manoeuvre against nations which dare oppose it or refuse to bow or kow-tow to its wishes.

Optimists see another superpower emerging eventually either through the decay of the US or as a result of an outright challenge.

Global communications will change the political landscape.

The American hegemonic dominance will continue until either China, the European Community or a revitalised Russia emerges to challenge the US' superpower status.

Weapons of mass destruction have not disappeared and non-proliferation has now been undermined by nuclear tests in India and Pakistan.

I do not believe a Third World War will occur, and I pray not during my time on this planet anyway or for the foreseeable future after my departure. However, war itself will not disappear, it will continue to be regional or local, more often perhaps within the states than between nations.

American foreign policy towards Asia is firm in some areas, ambivalent and downright contradictory in other instances.

What determines it is not right or wrong, rather realpolitik and US' vital strategic interests. Washington does not practise what it preaches, its foreign policy often becomes subversive and actions are taken without regard to conscience and morality.

I am sure most of the audience must be aware of this even the most liberal or patriotic Americans. The US harps about human rights and democracy in some Asian nations but is yet mute on the same issue when it involves some of its West Asian allies and good friends in other parts of the world.

I have nothing against the US' West Asian allies. They are free to run their countries as they deem fit. But why doesn't the US agitate and push for democracy where there is none; more human rights where in some places the record is abysmal.

The US seems to be strangely lacking in initiative and drive over these issues in that part of the world.

What is troubling me is the fundamental problem that there are nations that are simply being left behind by the onward progress of globalisation.

Global issues such as population, drugs, AIDS, the environment and human

rights are going to come much more to the fore.

As the world shrinks, we feel we shall have an increasing sense of the need for an international order. Globalisation may be a good thing for the West and developed societies, but it can also be a disaster for the poor.

The US' foreign policy should go slow on human rights, let human rights evolve as it must eventually be. Many of the 188-member nations of the United Nations have only become nation states in the last few years, and the Americans must strive to understand why they are so keen and enthusiastic to hang on to their independence.

They are poor. The Harvard Business School has more money or can generate more funds than many individual countries' gross domestic product.

The 21st century, like the previous one, is an American century. What I hope for is Washington would refrain from its bullying ways; learn to persuade and influence people, less arm-twisting, desist organising opposition groups and funding wars through proxies and clients.

There exists a great hope out there, a realisable dream in the American century because of the possibilities of cross-cultural fertilisation through new technologies.

It can be a century where we can live in peace and prosperity while simultaneously enjoying and respecting each other's ways and cultures as we come to know more about them.

It is tragic that, just as we need a strong international organisation, the United Nations is starved of fund caused mainly by the only remaining superpower and a founding father of the organisation.

The US today dominates the world body in a rather spectacular way. The US must pay its obligatory debts. To be fair, the US is not the only nation to be blamed. Often the United Nations is sidelined by its own member states. What happened in East Timor, Bosnia and Kosovo were unforgiveable because they were foreseeable. There have been too many international vacillations.

Perhaps, the United Nations should be given its own military police force. The United Nations should be made more visible in Washington and accorded greater importance by the US.

The US must re-engage itself with the United Nations. If the United Nations could not provide international order then who could?

In 1997 South-East Asia faced the sort of economic crisis we can well do without. We have learned our lessons well. We should teach our children, and if they, in turn, teach theirs and give them an even better head-start than they enjoyed, they may yet have their Pacific Century.