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Canberra should keep out of others' affairs

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EXCELLENT relations between Malaysia and Australia have resulted in flourishing trade, close education and defence co-operation and increased people-to-people contact.

With businessmen from both countries continuing to explore new opportunities and tourists flocking to destinations in both nations to enjoy the sun, sea and other attractions, one would expect a conducive environment for national leaders to enhance bilateral ties.

Unfortunately, the Australian leadership under Prime Minister John Howard prefers to negate the historical ties and the hard work that has been put in to bring the two nations much closer, just because of personal friendship.

Howard was one of the first foreign leaders to react to the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for moral misconduct on Sept 1, 1998, by saying Malaysia was moving towards a more "authoritarian approach".

This brought a hail of criticism from Malaysians who rightly believed it was not the Aussie leader's business to comment on an issue which was purely domestic.

After all, some said, he had no adverse comments when US President Bill Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives in December 1998 for perjury and obstruction of justice, stemming from hearings that followed his trysts with Monica Lewinsky.

For the record, Clinton was acquitted by the Democrat-controlled US Senate in February last year and allowed to complete his term in office.

Since the Anwar saga, some Australian leaders, media and non-governmental organisations seem to have adopted a negative attitude towards Malaysia although the business communities of both countries have disregarded this phenomenon and continue to work for mutual benefit.

It is sad that the island nation, which does not have a credible human rights record, especially in ensuring fair treatment of the Aborigines, and with a fraction of its population supporting the One Nation Party - established by fish and chips seller Pauline Hanson - which expounds racist policies, has taken upon itself to pass judgment on its neighbours.

Malaysians can understand Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent statement that Howard should pay more attention to the serious social problems at home rather than be a regional bully or teach Asian nations what to do.

"You have a Prime Minister who doesn't even recognise that you have a problem about this stealing one generation of Aborigines. Your law as applied has been very unfair to the aboriginal people, so I think it is better for you to look at home, where you have a lot of racial problems, and solve that before trying to solve other people's problems.

"If Australia wants to be a friend of Asia it should stop behaving as if it is there to teach us how to run our country. It is a small nation in terms of numbers and it should behave like a small nation and not be a teacher," Dr Mahathir told Australia's SBS Television.

Asked whether he thought Howard was welcome in the region, Dr Mahathir said: "No, I don't think so. Not in Malaysia, anyway... because he thinks we are undemocratic, we are unjust. He thinks his favourite politician in Malaysia (Anwar) should not face the law, that any finding that is not in his favour would be regarded as an injustice."

Howard may still think relations between the two countries are "cordial" but it is obvious that everything is not rosy and this can be attributed to Australia's decision to meddle in the affairs of another country.

It is hoped Canberra will take the cue from its business community which continues to work hard for symbiotic gains. Sovereign nations do not take lightly to bullying by self-appointed "guardians of standards and morality", especially those with a dubious track record.

Australia should value trade and diplomatic relations and work towards enhancing the strong ties, and cease its rhetoric so that the people of both countries can reap more benefits.

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