

14/07/2000

Has the CIA put on a new face?

THE end of the Cold War rendered countless doctrines and establishments irrelevant. It also transformed an entire American generation's perspective of the East, in particular with regards to its culture of fear. It was an event that left a deep impact on peoples and governments in the rest of the world. The result, as we know it, left only one super power still standing. Some things related to the Cold War, however, don't change.

The Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, is a case in hand. A spearhead of the US' Cold War effort, it was one of the first organisations that should have found itself redundant as soon as Moscow agreed to embrace the arms of capitalism. However, it has become too important for Washington and remains today a prominent feature in the American life. Action movies, for example, still portray CIA agents as dispensable and heroic undercover government spies whose mission is to save the world from the bad guys, except that instead of the Russians the villains now are the Arabs, Islamic fundamentalists, and democratic but corrupt governments. The idea of doing away with it, therefore, probably never even crossed the minds of the Americans, not least the movie makers in Hollywood.

If last month's conference in Washington on "Prospects of Malaysia in the post-Mahathir era" was meant to indicate the new path that the CIA will follow in the 21st Century, then it is quite clear that it is adopting a less covert and more academic approach towards matters concerning other countries. This is hard to swallow, of course. Since its set up by the US Congress in 1947, it has always been the principal intelligence and counter-intelligence agency for the American Government. Responsible to the US President through the National Security Council, the CIA has launched covert operations against a wide range of "left-wing" governments. It was a fact, according to Oxford, that the CIA organised secret political intervention and psychological warfare operations outside the US.

Seen in this context, the seemingly less covert CIA involved in discussions on a foreign country and the leader of that country in a conference whose proceedings were reported in the media would appear even more sinister. This is especially so after analysing the conclusions and predictions made by the conference. It concluded that Malaysia will face considerable political uncertainty, including infighting in Umno once Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gives up the leadership. It predicted new economic turmoil in three to five years due to growing fiscal debts brought on by the state's rescue of troubled companies in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis. It also concluded that the political career of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim wasn't necessarily over but before he can play a significant political role again, he will have to be pardoned by the King and reinstated as an Umno member.

The conference as reported was attended by officials from the CIA and the departments of State and Defence. Speakers included academicians, economists and former American diplomats and journalists in Malaysia. It would be insulting the intelligence of the Malaysian people if anyone were to suggest that this gathering of the US "intelligence community" was for academic purposes. And yet, if it was not for such a purpose, the decision of the spies to discuss Malaysia and Dr Mahathir openly and their predictions of turmoil and uncertainties are very disturbing, indeed. Who

were the conference organisers catering to when it conceived the idea of having the meeting? Is it for the CIA, or the US Congress that established the agency 53 years ago, or for American investors planning to put their money in Malaysia for the long term? Or is it just a message that Malaysia must try and decode?

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