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Our way in moving forward

PRAGMATISM, tempered with wisdom and experience, has often been a guiding force from the hearth to the community, from economic relations to the battlefield. It is circumstances that often times dictate our line of action, which can be a deflection of our original course. And if our decision does not go down well with some quarters, are we obliged to kowtow to them?

Every nation has its priorities, and its own idea of what augurs well for its development and future. So, when developed countries throw their ideas at us and persuade us to swallow them wholesale, we must exercise the flexibility within our means to sieve the grain from the husk, to adopt and adapt what suits us. The almost ideological chant of globalisation and liberalisation in the last few years is a case in point.

The Asian financial crisis is a perfect example of globalisation rearing its ugly head. If Malaysia had not stood up for itself and exercised selective exchange rate controls to regulate the flow of short-term capital, further effects on our economy would have been akin to the devastation left by the mythical Hydra. We have our nation's prosperity and people's livelihood to look after and we would be shirking our responsibilities if we did not act decisively to ensure everyone benefits.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad articulated in Cairo, Malaysia "will fight tooth and nail" if the country's prosperity is being threatened. His remarks are in keeping with his consistent beliefs, that we should study, debate, test, modify or jettison any results that are not as promised. Early this month in Tokyo, he told a conference audience that we should not be fanatical about ideas, and that the Government needs to be vigilant against any foreign attempt to undermine the economy.

Sadly, in defending our integrity and honour, those with the cheque book power have accused us of not subscribing to a free market. Indeed, we cannot afford not to, as we are a trading nation, in fact, the 17th largest in the world. But, if by being free means we have to bow to the dictates of developed countries with their chant of a level playing field for all, there seems to be no channel for poorer developing countries to voice their views on shaping economic development.

Not all countries tread the same path in the way forward. The shifting pace of productive growth and the uneven pattern of economic growth which causes some to be wealthier, and usually stronger, in relation to other nations is good enough rationale. The ebb and flow of events is such that wealth and power, economic and military strength are relative. We have to accept that all societies are subject to inexorable tendencies to change. How then can there be a level playing field when developed countries have years of economic advancement at their doorstep?

It seems a conundrum that the rich expect the developing countries to liberalise and do away with the protection of their borders at the same instant the developed countries do. Could it be that the rich are grappling with the age-old dilemma of rise and fall of powers within the international system, with technological innovation and alterations in power balances?

Whatever, developing countries should be free to innovate ways to move their own economies forward. They should not be made to feel guilty of not having danced to the tune of the piper as they have their people's welfare to look after.

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