

Leadership skills now better valued

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JUST a few months ago, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was branded a dictator who only wanted to hang on to power. His economic policy was criticised, western leaders snubbed him while his political opponents were heralded as the leaders of a new political culture.

There were enough people who believed that the PAS-led opposition front would form the next federal government or at least control a few more states. But in these uncertain times, the Prime Minister's consistency has been better valued. There is a new appreciation of his leadership among the western world, particularly the United States, which used to see him differently.

For Malaysians, who see the chaos in Indonesia and the worst economic downturn hitting Singapore, our political and economy stability have been counted as a blessing, even as the government attempts to ward off the effects of a recession.

Most Malaysians have enough work to keep themselves busy rather than take part in massive demonstrations outside the US Embassy or search for western tourists at hotels, as is happening in Indonesia.

Dr Mahathir has emerged as the undisputed leader of the region; the West seeks his support and opinion in their fight against terrorism and the Taliban regime. He has credentials which other leaders do not – he heads a model Islamic country, led by a moderate and liberal political party.

Singapore elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew's views may be good on East Asian affairs but it is Dr Mahathir who is taking centre stage because the war involves the Islamic world.

But what Dr Mahathir is saying is actually nothing new. His views on extremism have never changed. Even before the Sept 11 attacks in New York, Dr Mahathir had been hard on religious radicals – an approach that some people perceived as political action against PAS. Like Osama bin Laden, religion has been used to legitimise the political agenda of these radicals. Preventive laws were used against these militants but the action was attacked as draconian. Today, Dr Mahathir has been vindicated.

As PAS declared *jihād* against the United States, demonstrated outside the US Embassy, burnt the American flag and urged its members to fight alongside the Taliban, the same western diplomats who used to turn up at PAS gatherings to give moral support are looking at PAS leaders with alarm.

In the West, governments are rescuing companies and airlines in the same manner which they once ridiculed Malaysia for what they termed as bail-outs.

As the top western leaders begin to understand Dr Mahathir, there are still many in the western media who have to yet to grasp the diplomatic changes that are taking place.

In their news reports, many still have the misconception that Malaysia is anti-US and supportive of Osama. CNN has not helped clear this cloud of confusion. For example, it leaves out Dr Mahathir's strong line against terrorism but highlights his objection to the US retaliations against the Taliban.

In reality, the lines of communication between Kuala Lumpur and Washington have increased in frequency as Dr Mahathir and US President George W. Bush meet at the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit.

The US Embassy here, with access to correct information, has taken great pains to clarify inaccurate reports, swiftly sending out notes to the press. At a recent luncheon with over 100 American businessmen last week, Dr Mahathir was given a standing ovation after a question-and-answer session.

Malaysia is fast emerging as a reliable partner because Dr Mahathir enjoys strong ties with most West Asian countries. As efforts are made to hold an international conference on terrorism, Asean has already decided to host such a conference, the first in the region.

On the home front, those who have written off Dr Mahathir are re-evaluating their predictions. The opposition front, which confidently sees itself taking power in the next general election, is breaking up.

The DAP has pulled out from the front as top leaders start to "resign" from Parti Keadilan Nasional. PAS, the dominant party in the opposition front, is now regarded as an extremist party, even among opposition backers.

The alleged involvement of PAS supporters and members in the militant KMM has tarnished the image of PAS while many have questioned how the party intends to set up an Islamic state.

During the recent Sarawak elections, the DAP, PAS and Keadilan openly fought each other but all were defeated by Barisan Nasional, even as some analysts and observers predicted that the political landscape in the state will change once these three parties win some seats.

Sitting in the comfort of their air-conditioned offices and sipping drinks in Bangsar to exchange political stories, they could not see the humorous reaction of the Ibans in the longhouse when greeting a PAS leader. In his robe and turban, the PAS leader insisted on shaking their hands with gloves on.

At ceramahs in Bandar Kuching, DAP and Keadilan campaigners traded verbal blows openly as they criticised the existing political structure, saying their alternative should be given a chance. Within Keadilan, leaders who have quit have talked about returning to Umno, believing that their struggle is futile.

The talk now is that the Prime Minister will call for a general election by 2003 – and there are good reasons for it. The opposition front has lost its direction and the broad-based nature of Malaysia's economy should provide a strong buffer against the recessionary winds.