

15/11/2001

Democracy via undemocratic means

Shamsul Akmar

WHILE queuing up for security checks at the Heathrow Airport last Saturday, an Englishman going on a holiday to Bangkok struck up a conversation with a Malaysian traveller who was returning to Kuala Lumpur.

The former enquired about the political situation in Malaysia, but before the Malaysian could respond, the Englishman said: "I pity you for having to put up with your Prime Minister."

Obviously upset, the Malaysian retorted: "There is no need to be patronising. While our Prime Minister may have his share of critics, he does not condone the killing of innocent children like yours does".

The Englishman was taken aback and the small talk ended.

It is a case of differing perception and the sense of right and wrong. It is apparent that the Englishman had been fed all kinds of reports in the British media and other international publications about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's political and economic decisions in the past few years.

As a result, the one conclusion he could possibly make was that Dr Mahathir was bad for Malaysia, thus taking it upon himself to offer his sympathy to Malaysians for having "to put up with his (Dr Mahathir's) leadership".

To have such sentiments, the Englishman must believe that he is living in a better nation and that his Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is a person of higher moral standing and ability.

The Englishman must feel that he and the rest of his countrymen were better at choosing a leader.

For the Malaysian, he was probably right in assuming that the Englishman had no inkling whatsoever about the real situation in Malaysia.

The Englishman's condescension is in fact an insult as it assumes Malaysians are incapable of thinking for themselves regarding who and what kind of leader they want for their country.

In addition, the Malaysian, though he himself may not agree with some of Dr Mahathir's decisions, would have been galled by the fact that if a comparison must be made, Blair's "sins" are far more unforgivable.

However, more pertinent in terms of the bigger picture is that the views professed by the Englishman spoke volumes of the power of the media and how minds are shaped in the West.

Sadly, it also shows up the role played by some Malaysians who are angry with the present establishment in contributing to the negative perception of their own country.

A number of Malaysians are still campaigning against Dr Mahathir abroad, especially in the US and selected European countries.

They may have every right to do so, at least in the name of democracy. But what is the basis of seeking support from American politicians who are themselves responsible for policies which are being condemned by most Malaysians?

For example, the US Administration has been taken to task over its attack on Afghanistan. To most Malay Muslims, Washington is anti-Islam, practises double standards and cannot be trusted.

Yet, some of these Malaysians are prepared to seek "endorsement" from certain US politicians for their cause against Dr Mahathir and the government of the day.

In fact, the sentiments of not trusting the superpowers and developed

Western nations with regard to their "altruism" towards Malaysia and other developing nations is not something new.

Whenever there is a fallout between groups in a nation, Malaysia included, the losers have never been shown to have any qualms about turning to foreign support.

What is happening in Afghanistan is a classic example. The Northern Alliance, amid the US "anger" against the Taliban for supporting Osama bin Laden, is making the best of the situation in its bid to return to power in Afghanistan.

The Alliance seems to have won the day, for now, with the Taliban having been driven out of Kabul.

It will probably have a key role in forming the new Afghan Government, but who is to say there will not be a rejuggling and realignment of alliances in the months ahead, ending up with the new rulers in the same position faced by the old ones?

Then is it to be expected that with the one that lost, another will turn to the Western powers for support to get back into the mainstream.

"Divide and rule" is after all the best-ever strategy devised by the West to dominate and subjugate developing nations.

It is unfortunate that in most cases, the rich nations can justify their presence or interference in the affairs of the developing countries by claiming that they were "invited", never mind that the invitation comes from a minority and not the majority.

This does not stop the big powers from painting those they back as the more democratic or liberal, which usually means more amenable to Western values.

Not that there is anything wrong or undemocratic about Western values, but they are in effect forced upon people who might not want them, in part or in whole.

But such is democracy. The ends justify the means, no matter how undemocratic.

(END)