

08/01/2001

Give Myanmar a break

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EVERYTHING that has happened to me has made me the man I am today. There are some greedy Malaysians, some terrible things done but it didn't stop me from realising that Malaysia is my heritage, my country, right or wrong.

When I first went to the US aged 23, in October 1960 (and stayed there until early 1962), I did not personally encounter racial discrimination as the black did at the petrol stations, on buses, trains, in hotels, restaurants, public parks and restrooms. Every facet of American life was affected. It made me anti-racist. I disagreed with any theory that assumes an individual's abilities and potential are determined by his biological race, and that some races were inherently superior to others.

Even after the vicious race riots on May 13 1964 (caused by raising of sensitive issues) I stood firm against racism. I deplored it then and now. Hitherto, we have survived it. Thank God I have never lost faith in the wisdom and pragmatism of every Malaysian with undivided loyalty to this land and not like the birds of passage of some fair-weather Malaysians.

In spite that I still have some fear though I am hopeful and optimistic. All sane Malaysians know about the need for inter-racial cooperation and even harmony within the majority race.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is now in Myanmar on a work-cum-holiday visit. Tan Sri Razali Ismail, United Nations secretary general's special envoy to Myanmar is also there (his third visit) trying to arrange the meeting between the Myanmar's military leadership and Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader, who is under house arrest.

I expect, though not sanguinely something useful will develop following the visit of Dr Mahathir and Razali. Whatever, it does say much about the state of our political stability that Dr Mahathir can leave the country anytime he wants which he does often. Charismatic jingoism notwithstanding, Malaysia is peaceful, prosperous and stable.

Some optimists believe it would be a matter of time a genuine two-way communication or a pretence thereof will take place in Yangon between the military and Suu Kyi. The dialogue should and must take place, the sooner the better. Perhaps once the West's strong stand against the Myanmar's military is moderated. As it is, it is nothing less than the worst kind of double standards. Apply the same rule and sanctions to all. Why Myanmar and not Algeria and Brunei, an opposition newspaper columnist A. Razak Baginda, who is also Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's close collaborator, rightly asked. He wrote: "I see very little between the situation in Myanmar and Algeria where the Muslim party was denied victory (power) when the military staged a coup. It could in fact be argued that some Western countries were quite relieved to see the military takeover... a CIA-backed coup in Chile took place when popular Salvador Allende was overthrown (and killed)."

Razak thundered: "While democracy is on the rise, we have Brunei which is essentially a dictatorial regime in the form of an absolute monarchy. The Sultan of Brunei is almighty and his words are in effect law... archaic which resembles 18th century European absolutism."

Malaysia is one of the nations sympathetic to Yangon. The reasons are many: KL-Yangon relations are cordial and we want to make the relationship closer. Dr Mahathir's talk with the generals, I hope, will make them see the imperative to talk with Suu Kyi or her emissaries. But Suu Kyi must be

realistic, amenable and reconciliable. Threats, US sanctions, European support have not worked nor stopped Myanmar from being an Asean member in 1997. Perhaps if there were less foreign interference things might work better.

I visited Burma in the early sixties with Tun Razak when his good friend General Ne Win was in absolute power. Ne Win's successors are in control of this beautiful country ever since 1988 when the general resigned after leading it for 26 years. He visited Malaysia and Tun Razak took him to Pekan, his parliamentary constituency.

In the early years of independence British politicians espoused "Buddhist Socialism" but it did not work. Then in 1962 Ne Win introduced a unique "Burmese way to Socialism". He was careful not to alienate the largely non-Buddhist minorities by making Buddhism the state religion as U Nu (prime minister 1947-58 and again 1960-62) had threatened to do. Whether Ne Win and his successor have made the people of Myanmar suffer, it is not for me to make judgement.

The generals allowed a general election in May 1994, the first multi-party free election in 30 years. The opposition party, National League for Democracy led by Suu Kyi won but it was not allowed to take over power. The situation became an international event when Suu Kyi was award the Nobel Peace Prize and she and her friends, in and outside Myanmar, have been since then been striving to topple the military from power via demonstrations in defiance of law and order.

Malaysia is an active foreign investor in Myanmar, a nation with great economic and tourism potential. Kuala Lumpur has been an advocate of constructive engagement despite strong Western opposition to the generals but not to the Sheiks, Kings and other oppressive rulers. As a senior Western diplomat told me at a rumah terbuka yesterday, "It's a simple enough reason: Myanmar has no oil nor strategic value to the West. Perhaps Myanmar will be important in future when we need it as a strategy platform to contain Chinese expansion."

I believe with the right diplomatic, political and economic approach, even Myanmar will be irreparably and irreversibly changed but only at a pace which the generals do not feel threatened. There can be little doubt that sometimes things do defy belief and then even Laos and Kampuchea will open up to rapid change. Myanmar is in an even better position to respond to this coming shift.

Modernisation and globalisation continue to undermine traditional culture and we become the victim of cumulative economic gains I can, I suppose count Asean to change and remain indispensable for regional peace, prosperity and general stability.

We value democracy even far more highly than some Westerners do. However there is a limit. Idealism must be tempered with realism. Find a Buddhist solution to solve a Burmese problem.

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