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Look East for a softer, gentler globalised world

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PRIME MINISTER Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad introduced the Look East Policy in 1981 to emulate the positive aspects of Asian values, in particular the Japanese attitudes towards hard work.

While Malaysia and several other countries Look East, the Japanese youth are beginning to change and Look West. This is clearly evident in their new looks, multi-coloured hair and the embracing of many Western cultures and work attitudes. Even so, a Japanese professor has urged the world to learn from Japan's success, and continue to Look East.

Yoshihara Kunio, a visiting Professor from the Centre for South-East Asian Studies at Kyoto University, says the Japanese model of economic development is worth considering as an alternative to the American model of globalisation.

The social cost of the Japanese model is not as high as that of the American model, Professor Kunio, who is currently holding the Pok Rafeah Chair at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said.

Even though globalisation is preached by many as the answer to the world's problems, it is not without its drawbacks. Any policy should stress the results rather than the methods and globalisation is no exception. But Dr Mahathir has pointed out, "We are being told that globalisation must be espoused and practised even if it destroys us".

It is in this context that Professor Kunio's book is an important contribution. He looks at globalisation and its impact and effects on "national identity". The American model for development, while successful, comes with a high social cost brought about by the large socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor and between the haves and the have-nots.

Globalisation can bring great wealth to individuals and companies which have products for which there is a great demand, but at the same time it also brings about increased competition and the weakening of the country as a community.

The Japanese model is better, according to Kunio, "even if one concedes the weakness of the Japanese economy vis-a-vis the American one".

The Japanese way of globalisation offers attractive options. One is "less income inequality" and the other is that "it controls social ills much better".

The instruments used by the Japanese Government to limit income inequality and social ills while promoting economic growth are mass education and economic intervention. Kunio argues that education was used partly to empower the masses to cope with changing economic circumstances.

Kunio points out that there are basic differences in globalisation and national identity. With globalisation there is no central government to power integration and the national culture takes a back seat.

Even though each country is responsible for its own affairs, the economy is being globalised and increasingly many decisions of governments are being hijacked by multinationals and external forces.

With globalisation too, there is increased competition and with this there are numerous adverse consequences. Among them is the unequal distribution of income and the widening of existing divisions. It also gives rise to various ills and the country's national identity is weakened.

Free market forces and liberalisation, which are seen by some as part and parcel of globalisation, "tend to make people money-oriented, materialistic, secular, and individualistic" and societies are falling apart.

Even arch capitalists and speculators such as George Soros have second thoughts on the free and unbridled flow of capital. Soros has raised concerns and voiced doubts about the negative values that underpin the modern global economy.

"Insofar as there is a dominant belief in our society today," Soros says, "it is a belief in the magic of the marketplace. The doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism holds that the common good is best served by the uninhibited pursuit of self interest...Unsure of what they stand for, people increasingly rely on money as the criterion of value...The cult of success has replaced a belief in principles. Society has lost its anchor".

Not surprisingly the current trend and pressures of globalisation are also seen by many as the "Americanisation" of societies across the globe. The influence is unidirectional; that is from America to Malaysia, America to Hawaii and America to the rest of the world.

This is evident from the increased influence of American businesses and the pervasive nature of American culture.

In Hawaii, Professor Kunio says the locals (Hawaiians) are economically and culturally oppressed in their own land. The language of the Hawaiians is not the major language on the islands and the local culture is a sub-culture with the American culture dominating.

In trying to avoid the "Hawaiian fate" Kunio offers an option - that is to develop the country, improve and raise living standards and instil a sense of pride and love for one's country.

The other option is to create a national community outside the country. For these objectives to be achieved there is a need for effective mass education, government intervention or a guiding hand in the economy, strengthening the national language and national culture.

But this does not mean that the international language, English, should be neglected. English is becoming increasingly important with information technology and modern telecommunications.

The Professor's advice to East Asian and developing nations wanting to embrace globalisation is to "pursue the goal of promoting economic growth while limiting economic inequality and social ills".

How do countries with limited resources and expertise nor the required muscle do this? Dr Mahathir had told the Group of 77 in Havana, Cuba that: "The important thing is to focus on the results rather than the dogma. If the results are good then by all means implement as currently interpreted and practised, but if the result is bad for anyone, then globalisation must be reinterpreted and modified until the expected results are achieved".