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Malaysia-US relations: Improving or not?

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DO YOU know what determines the success or failure of governments? Harold Macmillan, a former British prime minister was reported to have said, "Events, dear boy, events".

The UMNO-led Barisan National (up to 1974 the Alliance) has won (with two-thirds majority) all general elections since 1955. First it was because of the fight for Merdeka but after independence it was the coalition government's economic performance.

Perhaps the Barisan National Government's achievement is not as spectacular as Singapore's or Pudong-Shanghai's but it is pretty good, and notably even as I say so, better than the rest of Asean's.

However the new voters - estimated to be 2.5 million plus another quarter of a million, perhaps more, security forces veterans - cannot be expected to remember all that.

Diplomacy - sometimes firm, often not but always frank though not necessarily graceful - is employed to manage our international relations to secure and advance Malaysian political, economic and security interests, and to enhance the standing of the nations while simultaneously guarding our independence and sovereignty.

If we had appeared assertive, and even pugnacious at times, it was because we do not want to encourage attempts to impose on us as if it were a "conditional sovereignty". We resent any power, superpower or regimal, dictating their policies on us nor do we tolerate blatant interferences in our domestic politics.

Small though we are, Malaysia is not and has never been a client state of any power.

The US finds it quite useful to put us and other developing nations on the defensive by making human rights into a major issue. In our case, it injects the gaoling of Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim into the bargain.

I will not be altogether surprised if Washington provide more support to various Malaysian opposition groups including all types of non-government organisations engaged in trying to discredit and ultimately topple the Government. It does seem these people have become too impatient to wait for the next polls.

They worked very hard during the 1999 general elections but not enough to swing the results. I know they have been planning and working hard since then to make their frustrations and discontent heard and felt via periodic street demonstrations.

I recall with pleasure that Malaysia (Malaya until 1963) and US has had a long-standing good relations. We want to enhance the relationship as indicated to the American ambassador here, Lynn Pascoe, by no other than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed himself last week. A similar desire was conveyed to US Secretary of State, Colin Powell personally recently.

We did have problems with the Clinton Administration which is gone, so let us begin afresh, with the Bush Administration, a relationship for mutual benefit.

After all, Malaysia is the twelfth largest importer of US products (US\$11.4 billion, US\$1 = RM3.80) more than the continued imports of American goods by India, Indonesia and Russia. American direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia totalled US\$5 billion between 1995-2000.

I can go on with the numerous good reasons that progressively can enhance the bilateral relations. There are now not less than 7,000

Malaysian students pursuing higher education in US (many more before the 1997 economic meltdown and the Asian financial crisis). An estimated 105,000 Malaysians have graduated from American universities and colleges and unlike other foreign students the majority of whom returned home, and are playing useful and influential roles in whatever they undertake.

The relations between the American and Malaysian defence and security fraternity are close and burgeoning.

It appears from what I heard here and in Washington that the matter of Anwar is the stumbling block for improving and enhancing the bilateral relations. The US, whether it likes to or not, must acquiesce to the de facto as well as the de jure reality of the Anwar case otherwise it questions and contests (which seemingly it does) the Malaysian Government's rationality. The issue of sovereignty bulks consistently large in our national sensibilities and considerations especially in dealing with the US which is seen as always keen to impose its will on small nations.

Of course, KL-Washington could continue to maintain statue-quo: practical and function ties with each other while Anwar, whom most Malaysians see as a "golden boy" of Washington, remains an intractable problem.

A Malaysian diplomat told me: "Clinton made human rights a core of the US foreign policy and as a result Anwar's case became a prickly subject, but now it is President Bush. It remains to be seen as whether (the case will) continue to be touchy. The Anwar issue is being kept alive by his supporters in Washington via the Free Anwar Campaign."

She added, "Anwar's supporters in Malaysia and in US are creating the impression that Anwar has the overwhelming support of Malaysians. They want the US to apply sanctions against Malaysia".

If Washington believes their embassy assessment, the CIA and a host of other intelligence reports on Malaysia - that the opposition will win the next general election - I should think it need not have to do much except just wait for the election to take place and then live happily ever after, politically speaking.

The eleventh general election is three years away, and in politics even a week is a long time. In between, things may not end up being so easy. Events, as Macmillan said, had a way of intruding into calculations. Indeed, I believe events will and must intrude in KL's political calculations as well as that of Washington's.

The majority of Malaysians want good relations with all countries and even more so with the sole superpower. I do also believe Malaysians not only understand but appreciate their government's resentment against foreign interferences in our domestic politics, and that's putting it mildly.

I do know that some foreign powers have been conducting themselves on the premise that the opposition will win the next general election. I do hope they must also know that all kinds of other things could happen before 2004, so please don't count your chickens.

Dr Mahathir is not impervious to criticism, believe me. However, he has zero tolerance for foreign interference or with these Malaysians who collude with foreign powers. But events may yet speak with a louder voice.

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