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Myanmar problem, Myanmar solution

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THIS week's subject, Myanmar, is nicely in accord with what I plan to do at the end of the month, a foreign travel.

Some journalists plume themselves on the power of the pen. A Ruler, last week, flattered me by alluding to the power of the ink. I said to his Royal Highness, in the company of a Cabinet Minister and a rather perplexed ambassador and their wives, that money is mightier than the pen because money does not smell, it's simply handsome.

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 blacks 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 are inherently superior to others.

Even after the vicious race riots on May 13, 1969 (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 or some fair-weather Malaysians.

In spite of that I still have some fear though I am hopeful and optimistic. All sane Malaysians know about the need for inter-racial co-operation and 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 a meeting between 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, a 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 difference 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 neither worked nor stopped Myanmar from being an Asean member in 1997. Perhaps if there were less foreign interference things might work better.

The generals, I contend, will be more willing to co-operate if external pressure is reduced, better still ceased. Small nations' world view is generally regional, in contrast to Americans and Europeans who supposedly see everything in global terms. Do they really?

It is an extreme offence when foreign interferences become an end in itself. Suu Kyi has said that Nelson Mandela's example of compromise and reconciliation had inspired her, then she must put it into practice for the good of Myanmar.

Negotiate without preconditions except in the spirit of give and take by putting the past behind and get on with the business of rebuilding Myanmar into a prosperous and modern nation.

The 1995 spirit of reconciliation must be revived through dialogue which I believe Razali is trying to organise between the soldiers and politicians. A happy resolution is not impossible, actually.

I visited Burma in the early sixties with Tun Abdul 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.

Ne Win, few know, was the father of the modern Myanmar army, Aung San (Suu Kyi's father) was the nation's first Defence Minister. My first direct contact with Myanmar politics was when I as a young reporter attended a barbecue party given by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra in honour of U Ba Swee, the Deputy Prime Minister of Myanmar in the late 1950s at the Residency (now Tunku's Memorial) and then at a subsequent Asian Film Festival, also in Kuala Lumpur.

Burma was administered by the British from India until 1937 when it came directly under London, however, all important powers were in the hands of the Governor. It became an independent nation on Jan 4, 1948 at 4.20am - the hour was chosen by Buddhist astrologers.

In the case of our Merdeka the hour was chosen by the Tunku and the once powerful Pemuda Umno headed by Encik Sardon Jubir and Ahmad Badawi - midnight, Aug 30, 1957.

What impressed me about the people of Myanmar, mostly Buddhists, is their religion which occupies a larger part in their lives and their longyi (pelekat or sarung) worn by both sexes like most rural Malays once did. The Myanmar men also wear a single breasted short jacket while their women's garment is similar but double-breasted, often short-sleeved, and usually of transparent white or beige material.

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 judgment, it's up to them to overthrow them.

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 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 staging platform to contain Chinese expansion."

The Burma road built by the American army during the Second World War was used by the American military convoy and Allied forces to cross into China from India and northern Burma.

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. I can't imagine the leaders of Myanmar not needing to talk. The people should be unhappy if their leaders couldn't even meet to talk. Personally, I can't imagine not needing to write.

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