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US must accept reality on Anwar

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MALAYSIAN policies which project a modernist-Islamic perspective have often clashed with the United States because the Americans see such policies as both consequential and catalytic, beyond intrinsic bilateral relations.

Our independent foreign policy, I hasten to add, must not be perceived as anti-American; it is not. On the contrary, KL-Washington relations are viewed as of top-rate importance, alongside our relations with Asean, China, Japan, the Commonwealth, Islamic nations and the European Union.

In fact, I personally view the KL-Washington interaction as very crucial because it is central to our future development and well-being. I do not want to see any deterioration in the relationship, if I can help it.

Rhetoric aside, I do hope a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President George W. Bush will take place when they are both in Shanghai for the Apec conference in October.

Regarding the Opposition's, in particular Keadilan's, supposedly pre-destined victory in future elections, without taking into account the complex and dangerous racial and religious politics, it is simplistic to suggest, and not a very subtle slam at the disliked Dr Mahathir and the 14 coalition parties he leads.

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 (before 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 if 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 of 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 nation while simultaneously guarding our independence and sovereignty.

If we have appeared assertive, and even pugnacious at times, it is because we do not want to encourage attempts to impose on us, as it were, a "conditional sovereignty". We resent any power, superpower or regional, dictating its policies to us, nor do we tolerate blatant interference 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 often developing nations on the defensive by making human rights a major issue. In our case, it injects the gaoling of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim into the bargain.

I will not be altogether surprised if Washington provides more support to various Malaysian opposition groups including all types of non-governmental 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 election, but not enough to swing the results. I know they have been planning and working hard since then to make their frustration and discontent heard and felt via periodic street demonstrations.

I recall with pleasure that Malaysia (Malaya until 1963) and the US have had long-standing good relations. We want to enhance the relationship as indicated to the American ambassador here, Lynn Pascoe, by no less than Dr Mahathir 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 12th largest importer of US products (over RM43 billion), more than the combined imports of American goods by India, Indonesia and Russia. American direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia totalled US\$5 billion (RM19 billion) between 1995 and 2000.

I can go on with the numerous good reasons that progressively can enhance bilateral relations. There are now not less than 7,000 Malaysian students pursuing higher education in the 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 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 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 status quo: practical and functional 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 George W. Bush. It remains to be seen 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 the 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 its 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 do much except wait for the election to take place and then live happily ever after, politically speaking.

The 11th 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, have a way of intruding into calculations. Indeed, I believe events will and must intrude into 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 that Malaysians not only understand but appreciate their government's resentment of 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 those Malaysians who collude with foreign powers. But events may yet speak with a louder voice.

Dr Mahathir has been in office for 27 years (20 of them as PM) and he has gone through, especially since 1997, much spite and vicious criticism, but he seems none the worse for it.

He has faced a barrage of crises, one after another, but he has survived, combining his political talent, internal confusion and contradictions with his unique personality characteristics and idiosyncratic qualities.

The cerebral qualities and his outspoken and combative nature have brought him an international standing, but it has not necessarily always served Malaysia well. Dr Mahathir has offended some capitals, but speaking as he does for Malaysia he has done much to create.

Washington is making an unrealistic demand if Anwar's release or retrial is linked to better relations. You already know Dr Mahathir's response.

The linkage is not palatable. It is tantamount to a command for us to surrender our sovereignty, independence, self-esteem and respect at Washington's altar. Sorry, it is utterly unacceptable.

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