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Asians have the right to do things their way: Dr M

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asia and Malaysia have the right to do things their own way as long as there is approval from the majority of the people and the West should not try to impose its policies and ideologies on them.

He said Asia will follow what is good from Europe and the US but it must have freedom to decide what it should emulate.

"Those who believe in freedom, human rights and democracy must allow us to manage the balance between peace and prosperity that we have achieved on our own," he said when opening the 30th Annual Williamsburg Conference in Kuala Lumpur last night.

The conference, which ends on Saturday, is an annual high-level, private sector gathering of Asian and American leaders from the business sector, government, media and academia. The last time Malaysia hosted the conference was in 1987.

Addressing decision-makers and policy-formulators from 15 countries, Dr Mahathir said being an Asian country, Malaysia does not reject all Western values but it should be allowed to retain Asian values which it feels are better.

He said in Malaysia, the people freely support the Government's efforts to seek peace and prosperity.

"Why should there be objections by others who are not really affected by our ways?" he asked.

In his keynote address themed "Malaysia and Asia: Seeking a Balance between Peace and Prosperity", Dr Mahathir said in the pursuit of ideological concepts, the original reasons and intentions are always forgotten.

He observed that liberal democracy and human rights ideologies which are promoted by the West are now being forced upon society through deprivation of the rights of most members of the society, just like what was done by dictatorial governments to uphold Socialism and Communism.

"Be democratic and uphold human rights or else you will lose your rights.

"Is it democratic to go about promoting democracy this way?" he said, adding that it would seem democracy is more important than human rights and the well-being of the people.

He also noted that aid by developed nations to the poor countries is no longer voluntary in nature as there are conditions tied to it.

He cited the changes in the US approach over assistance to needy countries where the aid is now extended with conditions.

"America has become ugly and American embassies everywhere must be built behind high walls," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said it is undemocratic for the Western democrats to use force, including economic pressures, to gain acceptance of a system or policy.

"But force is being used every time to gain Asian compliance.

"And many of the things that they have to accept are actually detrimental to their interest," he said, adding that due to this experience, Asians are leery of the good intentions expressed by the West over globalisation.

The Prime Minister also said that it is a form of double-standards when Asians are not allowed to have their own organisation when others in

Europe and North America have.

"It is shameful that the countries of East Asia have to hide behind other names, like Asean (the Association of South-East Asian Nations) plus three in order for them to get together," he said.

As Asians are heterogeneous and deeply divided, he said there is no way they can conspire to confront the West.

Furthermore, he said Asians know they need the rich countries like Europe and America in order to grow and prosper.

"Malaysia cannot understand the suspicions towards Asian countries," he said.

He recalled when Malaysia proposed a link-up between the South-East Asian countries and the economies of NorthEast Asia through the formation of the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) some 10 years ago, the countries in east, north and south of Asia were told that they may not talk to each other except in the presence of countries from outside the region.

He said the proposed EAEG was not an economic community like the European Economic Community, but merely a consultative forum to identify and discuss common problems and formulate common stands.

The EAEG was later called the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC).

Dr Mahathir emphasised that Malaysia is not anti-West nor anti-Europeans as the country has opened up to European investments since its Independence.

Dr Mahathir also spoke at length about Malaysia's policies and achievements in maintaining peace in the multi-racial country.

In formulating its national policy, he said Malaysia picks and chooses with pragmatism.

The country also acquired crisis management skills when its progress plans were derailed by crisis such as the attack on its currency (in 1997) and the September 11 events in the US.

"Our unorthodox way of dealing with the currency crisis is not unusual for us," he said, referring to the Government's response to the crisis by pegging the ringgit to the US dollar and imposing selective capital controls, a move which was against measures proposed by the International Monetary Fund.

According to him, Malaysia's greatest achievement is the management of race relations.

"Here, I would like to say that racial harmony is achieved in Malaysia because of Islam and because the majority of the people here are Muslims," he said, adding that in Malaysia, the majority of the Malay Muslims try to adhere to the true fundamentals of Islam.

"Fundamentalism is not about being extreme.

Malaysia also believes in human rights for all and respects the right of the individuals.

However, he said it is wrong for individuals and minorities to exercise their rights in a disruptive ways.

The conference, which is organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli), will examine peace and stability in Asia, economic prospects, the war on terrorism as well as the roles of Malaysia and South-East Asia and the US in the region.

The Williamsburg Conference, known for the prominent participants and off-the-record discussions, was first convened in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1971 to enhance US-Asia relations.

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