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NAM-Malaysia

MALAYSIA'S LONG ROAD TO THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT

A Special Report

By: Santha Oorjitham

KUALA LUMPUR: When the newly independent Malaysia first knocked on the door of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) for membership, she found it slammed shut in her face. But that was more than four decades ago when the young Malaysia was struggling to find her place in the sun.

Come February next year, Malaysia will take over the chairmanship of the movement of more than 120 Third World countries which are also home to more than half of the world's population.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar says Malaysia sees its role as the chairman of NAM next year as a form of recognition.

He said although Malaysia did not campaign for the post, it was asked to host the heads of state summit and lead the organization.

Malaysia has come a long way indeed since the 1960s, when NAM members blocked its entry to the movement, labelling it a puppet of the West.

Bernama's Santha Oorjitham talked to political veterans to trace Malaysia's colourful history with the 50-year-old NAM whose heads of state first met in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961, with 25 countries taking part.

Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, did not want to join because NAM was seen as socialist and the newly independent country did not want to offend any foreign power then, especially Britain.

Former deputy prime minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam recalls that the Tunku's deputy, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, and other younger politicians wanted Malaysia to have a voice in NAM -- at least as an observer.

"Tun Razak did not oppose Tunku whose strong stand was from the point of view of the pro-West politics of the time," says Musa, who was political secretary to Transport Minister Tan Sri Sardon Jubir at that time.

"But Tun Razak took the long term view that we should be present, to be in touch."

Later, between the second NAM summit in 1964 and 1969, Malaysia wanted to join but Indonesia blocked its membership, claiming Malaysia was pro-West, pro-imperialist and capitalist.

AAPSO STRATEGY

The Malaysian proponents of NAM then adopted a new strategy to get into the movement by forming a Malaysian branch of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), a front organisation of NAM.

An eight-member delegation headed by a young MP, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, tried to attend its international conference in Winneba, Ghana, in 1965.

New Straits Times Group Editor-in-Chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, who was then political secretary to Tun Razak, was part of the delegation which was not allowed to enter the meeting. But they met people attending the meeting and issued statements.

"They knew the way to overcome Indonesia's opposition to us was to go to these conferences and explain that Malaysia was not a neo-colonialist as we were accused of being -- and we succeeded," said Abdullah in his writing on the incident in "Tunku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia's Foreign Policy, 1963 - 1970".

Former MCA President Tan Sri Lee San Choon, another member of the delegation, says the Tunku found out about the trip when they were on their way back and was reported to be angry.

Lee and other members stayed in Cairo for a few days because they didn't know whether to go back to Kuala Lumpur or wait until things settled

down.

"It was said that Tunku was extremely unhappy and may take some action," says Lee, who was also a young MP then.

Malaysia also tried to attend the third NAM summit which was scheduled to be held in Algeria in mid-1960s.

The summit was cancelled because of a coup but the junior members of Malaysia's delegation managed to get into the summit venue although Malaysia was not registered.

"Everything was in chaos, without direction," recalls Musa. "We were there but we were not accepted as members, not because we were not accepted but because there was no conference. But Malaysia had tried to involve itself," he recalls.

Malaysia finally became a member of NAM in 1969, after Tunku Abdul Rahman retired.

NEW ROLE IN OLD MOVEMENT

The Non-Aligned Movement can play a role in the globalisation process, and Malaysia, as its chairman from 2003 through 2006, can also play an important role in NAM, say several observers and analysts.

In fact, Malaysia started to become a leader within the organization when it became more active in the early 1980s under the leadership of Dr Mahathir.

The prime minister has attended all the summits during his term except for the 1998 summit in Durban, South Africa.

At the summits, he focused on South-South Cooperation, North-South dialogue, development and nuclear disarmament.

Nigerian political scientist Madu Magnus Emeka, who is a PhD student at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, says Malaysia has been the frontliner in pushing the interests of developing nations in the international arena, such as currency controls and the opening of Western markets for goods from developing countries.

Next year, he says, when Malaysia chairs NAM, the summit will determine the future direction of African, Asian and Latin American countries.

"Most African countries come here to learn from Malaysia on how to handle some intractable problems," he says, "and whatever they do now will even be copied by some other nations, which will be the precedent."

Former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam says Malaysia has come a long way to host next year's NAM summit and lead the group from 2003 to 2006.

He recalls the mid-1960s when Malaysia was blocked from entering NAM.

"We knocked at the door and they closed the door," he says. "They locked the door. We could not enter. Sometimes, we would knock on the door and beg for admission."

NAM'S INFLUENCE

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar says NAM can play a role to influence the globalisation process so that NAM is not isolated by global development trends.

"We want to see the emergence of an economic system, a trade system, a financial system which is more fair, equitable, does not take sides, tries to level the field so that we have the chance to compete more fairly."

Malaysia is now part of the NAM Troika of past, present and future chairmen.

Malaysia has also hosted the G-15 summits in 1990 and 1997 and now heads the grouping's ICT Taskforce.

The G-15, with 19 members that are considered the more developed among Third World nations, is a direct offshoot of the 9th NAM Summit in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1989. Its mission is to spur more trade and

economic exchanges among the NAM members. -- Bernama
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