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PM's stand on flag-burning was correct

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is right to play down the flag-burning incident in Jakarta, that often-violent street demonstration capital of the world.

The prime minister's characteristic statesmanlike response in a situation such as this is in sharp contrast with the ugly display of petulance of the Speaker of the People's Consultative Council, Amein Rais the political opportunist, even by the standards of Indonesian politics.

However charitable a view we wish to take, what we have been treated to by the mob in Jakarta cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered an aberration.

While this behaviour pattern, mercifully, is alien to us, it is deeply ingrained in the Indonesian cultural psyche.

A point often overlooked by our people is that in more than 50 years of independence, Indonesia has never really settled down in political, economic and social terms.

Its whole existence is simply a larger than life "wayang kulit", replete with myths and fantasies. How anyone can be expected to engage such a country in regular social, economic or social intercourse based on practical realism is something on which we must concentrate our minds as we seek to normalise relations on terms of equality and mutual respect?

Indonesia is, without doubt, a failed state. Corruption has become so institutionalised and deeply entrenched that it is, for all practical purposes, intractable.

Taten Masduki, the highly respected leader of Indonesia Corruption Watch, did not mince words when he said, with reference to Indonesia's ranking in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2002, "Indonesia deserves corrupt nation rank" (NST, Aug 30).

He continued that the close to the bottom ranking was, "well deserved because unchecked corruption practices can be found at every administration level".

According to the same report, he said political corruption under President Megawati was "frighteningly worse" compared with the situation during Suharto's rule.

The illegals, with whose plight Indonesia is so concerned, are themselves the victims of official corruption, which has over the last half a century impoverished what is potentially a resource-rich country, and in the process marginalised millions of its citizens.

The benefits that should have accrued to them have, in the event, gone elsewhere.

Human rights concerns, like charity, articulated so forcefully and with such dramatic overtones by both Amien Rais and Philippine president Gloria Arroyo, should begin at home.

The accusing finger should be pointed not at Malaysia, but at themselves.

It sounds terribly hollow and hypocritical to talk about human rights for their illegals in Malaysia when it is the denial of human rights at home - the rights to food, drinking water, housing, security and employment - that have driven millions of Filipinos and Indonesians to the four corners of the globe to escape from the grinding poverty.

Leaders in the Philippines should reflect upon these ironies before attempting to secure the moral high ground.

Having said that, if we lack the will to confront corruption decisively, a similar fate awaits us. It is no comfort that we have dropped from our 2001 score of 5.0 to 4.9 in the Transparency International Corruption