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PM: Look East policy helped spur Malaysia's development

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia's "Look East" policy helped the country emerge as the fastest-growing and most developed of the world's developing countries, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

Twenty years since the policy's inception, the Prime Minister said the nation's best and most productive employees and executives had been those trained under the policy, adopting work ethics that had made them productive and readily employable.

Dr Mahathir said their dedication, loyalty and productivity were higher than average, and they were also better able to cope with the discipline required of the workplace.

"The Look East policy has brought the desired results and accelerated Malaysia's development through providing the right kind of workers for increased foreign investment, technology transfer and in-house training.

"Familiarity with Eastern values and work environments as well as languages ensures ready acceptance by Japanese and Korean enterprises, and by others," he said at a dinner to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Look East policy at the Palace of the Golden Horses.

Dr Mahathir said it was noted that students and workers trained under the policy were less prone to being distracted by politics and anti-social activities.

"They appear more able to concentrate on their studies, training and work and to acquire the necessary skills. Indeed, they give less problems to the Government and the nation."

On whether Malaysia would continue looking East, now that questions had been raised concerning the management principles and practices of Japan and South Korea, Dr Mahathir said approaches need to be reviewed and shortcomings identified and addressed.

"We are still looking East in order to learn from the mistakes as much as from the right things they do.

"We are still convinced of the efficacy of government-private sector co-operation. The work ethics and basic philosophy of Japan and Korea remain relevant in the economic development of a nation."

Dr Mahathir stressed the Government was positive and optimistic regarding Look East programmes and had no intention of abolishing them, saying they had also become an important bond in the overall relationship between Malaysia and Japan and South Korea.

"Looking East is not just to copy everything that is being done in Eastern countries but also to learn what wrong steps we will have to avoid.

"Looking East is not exclusively about learning how Eastern countries manage their societies and economies but also how they mismanage their economies and fail. We will then know what not to do."

Dr Mahathir recalled the great challenge to get support within the country as well as from Japan and South Korea when the policy was initiated.

Many questioned the rationale of learning from those who had copied the Western countries that had developed the modern industrial economy and to which the whole world looked for inspiration and guidance.

However, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia did the opposite, seeing that the West had forgotten the difficult years of their industrialisation and was too fond of assuming that the process was easy and natural.

On the contrary, in the post-war years, Japan and South Korea rose from the ashes to build powerful industrial economies. Their experience was recent and they still remembered how they did it.

Dr Mahathir said the Government did not think the Western work culture would work for this country.

Western culture, he contended, was confrontational and based on the winner taking all; disputes between employers and employees were tests of strength.

"The employers will lock out and the employees will go on strike."

Another unsuitable Western trait concerned the laying-off of workers when companies were ailing. Unemployment benefits made people lazy and dependent, preferring not to work but to live on the dole.

Dr Mahathir felt unemployment benefits could be paid if only a small minority were unemployed while the majority worked to increase the wealth of the country and contribute to government funds.

"The East still offers us the best value systems which can help us grow and develop. Eventually using the Eastern culture, we will be able to achieve developed-nation status," he said.

The only regret for Malaysia, said Dr Mahathir, was the inability to get as many places in universities and training institutions, as well as work places for hands-on training under the programme.

At present, there are about 2,000 Malaysian students and trainees in Japan and 85 in South Korea.