

Dr M shares wisdom with entrepreneurs

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COMMENT
BY HOO BAN KHEE

HE CAME, he spoke and he won them over, hands down. This was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at his best.

Delivering the keynote address at the 7th World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention at Sunway Lagoon Convention Centre in Subang Jaya, he was sharp but not cutting, serious but not without humour.

There was no standing ovation, but at the dialogue that wrapped up the opening ceremony a Hong Kong delegate heaped praises on him and tried to talk him out of stepping down as prime minister this October.

He turned it down politely, reminding his audience that if he changed his mind, he would lose his credibility; and if he lost his credibility, he would not be useful anymore.

An Indonesian delegate, speaking in Bahasa Indonesia to International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz after her speech, proposed that "Pak Mahathir" be made the adviser to the WCEC to help smoothen some of the "difficulties" faced by Chinese entrepreneurs.

Sportingly, Rafidah promised to convey the message to her boss; but she cautioned that each government had its own policy and an adviser could only be effective if his advice was accepted.

Dr Mahathir's message to the 3,000 top Chinese businessmen from the four corners of the world was precise: be a growth partner and share the prosperity.

The three-day world conference covers a wide range of big issues, from globalisation and the K-economy to the future role and contributions of Chinese enterprises in the world economy.

Dr Mahathir gave the delegates plenty to chew on, besides the sumptuous buffet

spreads and dinners.

It has been estimated that there are 60 million overseas Chinese in the world, with an estimated wealth of US\$1.5 trillion, arguably making up the third largest economy in the world after the United States and Japan.

Scholars argue that, going by the numbers and the wealth the overseas Chinese have generated and are capable of generating, they can hold sway over the global economy.

However, Dr Mahathir pointed out that, far from trying for domination in Ideology or in restructuring the system of the world, overseas Chinese had maintained a low profile.

"Not being protected by China as a super-power-. the overseas Chinese have always been sensitive to the question of their political and economic loyalty to the countries they have settled in.

"Still their success and their wealth have been the cause of much envy and jealousy on the part of the indigenous people. Off and on, there would be outbreaks of violence in which the Chinese residents were the target."

But they are resilient. When the violence is over, most of them still opt to stay on in the countries of their adoption, to rebuild their businesses and regain their wealth, he noted.

Like a good doctor, Dr Mahathir offered his prescriptions.

He told the overseas Chinese to be more visible in the nation-building process of their host country to help correct the long-held stereotypical view of the overseas Chinese, biased perhaps by the behaviour of the earlier waves of emigres who appeared to be more

focused on enhancing their wealth than on contributing to the socio-economic development of the host country.

"Whenever possible, they should have true partnerships with the locals. And the locals, on their part, must make serious attempts to learn and acquire the business and entrepreneurial skills of the Chinese," he added.

Dr Mahathir said that between being dominated by ethnically different foreigners and getting a share of the wealth generated by local citizens of Chinese origin, countries (in Southeast Asia) should prefer the local Chinese.

"They, at least, are sensitive to the indigenous people, are prepared to share the opportunities and the wealth, and are not going to call upon China to force the governments of these countries to accept systems which would work against the interests of the indigenous people," he said.

He advised the Chinese to be sensitive to local conditions and the need to ensure that a good environment existed for business in these countries.

They must work closely with the indigenous people and help to reduce the economic disparities between them and the locals.

It would certainly contribute not only to the fair sharing of the wealth released by Chinese entrepreneurship but would also help prevent the kind of incidents that seemed to be common in many countries in Southeast Asia whenever bad times came.

"The Chinese are well known for their charity work and this can contribute towards great social justice in their countries of adoption," added the much-respected prime minister who has made multiracial Malaysia a role model for the world.