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Mahathir-Chinese

CHINESE COMMUNITY'S VIEWS ON PRIME MINISTER HAVE HAD A "SEA-CHANGE"

By:Santha Oorjitham

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 19 (Bernama) -- Before Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister in 1981, his opponents had labelled him an "ultra Malay" and "anti-Chinese".

But 22 years later, as he prepares to retire, most of the Chinese community have changed their minds about him.

"When Dr Mahathir was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and earmarked for Prime Minister," recalled Democratic Action Party (DAP) chairman Lim Kit Siang, "there was considerable distrust and suspicion all round in view of 'The Malay Dilemma' and his political record."

In his book, "The Malay Dilemma, first published in 1970, Dr Mahathir had called for "constructive protection" for the Malays.

He said the Malay dilemma was "whether they {the Malays} should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if it blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little."

Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim, of the University of Malaya's History Department, said Dr Mahathir was among the "ultra" group who opposed Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, towards the end of his term.

"They believed the Tunku was not giving sufficient opportunities for the Malays in the economic sector," he said.

When Dr Mahathir became the fourth Prime Minister, Dr Khoo said, the non-Malays were worried that the Malays might take over their economic interests.

"But all that was forgotten by the 1990s," the historian said, "when the economy boomed -- mainly because of Dr Mahathir's efforts to turn the country towards Vision 2020."

During his first 100 days, Dr Mahathir met a wide cross-section of the Chinese community, including hosting visiting Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang.

He attended an MCA dinner in his honour and later launched the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall's 58th anniversary and National Day celebrations, promising to have more dialogues with the people and asking them to continue voicing their opinions on national problems.

In September, he opened the MCA General Assembly, warning Barisan Nasional parties not to disturb the status quo: The day before, MCA Youth had called for a second Deputy Prime Minister, coming from the MCA.

In October, the Prime Minister met a delegation from MCA Youth for three hours and received a memorandum from them containing the resolutions passed at their assembly.

Although he rejected their call for a second Deputy Prime Minister, he took note of the other issues they raised (on the appointment of more Chinese District Officers and Assistant District Officers, overcoming citizenship problems of some non-Malays, etc.) and said he was willing to meet them again about any new developments.

Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) president Tan Sri William Cheng said the Chinese business community had known Dr Mahathir from his term as Minister of Trade and Industry.

Some were not sure what new policies he would introduce and were a little concerned, Cheng said, but after a few years these fears disappeared.

Cheng, who is also chairman and CEO of Lion Group, said Dr Mahathir was

seen as capable, aggressive and a bold decision-maker who could react fast when necessary, encouraging Malaysia to move from one level to the next.

"We really needed a Prime Minister like that. From 1988 to 1997, Malaysia had an average annual growth of eight to 10 per cent. If not for the Asian Economic Crisis, the economy would have grown further."

Education was the burning issue for the Chinese community in the 1970s, according to Kit Siang: "The non-Malays felt there was no future for them in higher education in the country and they had to go overseas."

But by the late 1980s and the 1990s, there were extra places available in private colleges.

Mother-tongue education was no longer under a "sword of Damocles," Lim said, when the Education Act 1996 did away with the section empowering the Minister of Education to close down vernacular schools.

However, some Chinese educationists are still concerned.

Dr Kua Kia Soong, principal of the New Era College set up by the Chinese education movement Dong Jiao Zong, pointed out that the Unified Examination Certificates from independent Chinese secondary schools are still not recognised for admission into Government universities or the civil service in Malaysia.

The former DAP MP for Petaling Jaya said the new Education Act in 1996 was not as good as the original 1961 Act, "which gave mother-tongue education the right to exist. Now it exists only at the behest of the Minister of Education."

Professor Khoo also noted that some of the Chinese community believe that mother-tongue education is under threat from the new Vision Schools.

"They feel it might be the first stage to changing the character of Chinese schools," he said.

Kit Siang said there has been a sea-change in the Chinese perceptions of Dr Mahathir. "They now regard him as a moderate in stemming Islamic extremism."

He sees the 1995 general election results not as an MCA and Gerakan victory but a Mahathir victory in getting the Chinese votes, thanks to liberalisation on questions of language, education, culture and the economy.

And in the 1999 general elections, he said, "The Chinese were his saviour in getting the two-thirds majority in Parliament."

One measure of the community's feelings is their plan for a private farewell dinner for Dr Mahathir.

"We want to seek his views on retirement," said ACCCIM president Cheng.

"He is an asset to the country and the Third World. He should not retire completely. If he has time, we hope he will use his influence and contacts to serve not only Malaysia but the Third World."

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