

29 DEC 2003

Mahathir-Broker

DR MAHATHIR COULD BE HONEST BROKER, SAYS HERITAGE FOUNDATION

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, Dec 29 (Bernama) -- Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad could play an effective role as "honest broker" in finding a solution to some difficult issues, especially in the Islamic world where he is known and respected.

Edwin J. Feulner, president of Heritage Foundation, a think-tank here, said in an interview here that the former prime minister, who is known for his work in promoting world peace, could open the channels of communication with countries like Sudan and Yemen "where we (the United States) have serious problems."

"He could do very, very well in those areas -- he's a man of immense talents and capabilities -- I don't think he'll just go horseback riding or book writing after his retirement," said Fuelner, who personally met Dr Mahathir in October in New York where the latter delivered his final speech as prime minister at the United Nations General Assembly.

He said that Dr Mahathir could play an influential role in bringing the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) into the modern era -- use it as a forum for positive changes as Malaysia chairs the two international organisations.

On Dr Mahathir's record as prime minister, Fuelner described him as a "world class leader who has made every Malaysian I know very proud to be a Malaysian -- more than other countries in Asia I have been to.

"He has played a historic role in nation-building and united his disparate population in a short time.

"My one criticism of Dr Mahathir is his rhetoric towards the outside world -- his last speech (at the OIC) did not leave a good taste in the mouth -- here in the West.

"His achievements were unfortunately overshadowed by his very offensive language at the OIC summit -- it made a lot of people forget his success."

Feulner, who admires and respect Dr Mahathir, said that "on balance, he'll be seen as one of the great leaders in East Asia."

On the new prime minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Fuelner, who hosted a dinner for him with Vice President Dick Cheney as guest here in Washington about 14 months ago, said: "He is very different in terms of temperament -- a firm, fair and dignified leader who is likely to build on the base built by Dr Mahathir and keep the momentum going in the right direction."

Feulner described Abdullah, as "a very thoughtful and careful man," who has called for more transparency in government -- a good move for Malaysia in moving to become a more open society.

In fact, he said, Malaysia can play a critical role in the Islamic world and serve as a model for other Islamic countries.

He regretted that Malaysia was lumped together with nine other countries as a country that lacks religious freedom in a recent US government report on international religious freedom.

"When in Malaysia, I meet my Muslim friends who tell me about their pilgrimage to Mecca and a Christian friend who tells me about his trip to the Vatican. This may not happen in some countries. There are mosques, churches and temples everywhere -- Malaysia is one of those countries where there is religious tolerance."

Feulner has extensive experience in public policy and in the government. In 1989, President Ronald Reagan conferred the Presidential Citizens Medal on him as a "leader of conservatism." He is also author of

five books including "Leadership for America" and "The March of Freedom."

The Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, promotes conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government and a strong national defence.

-- BERNAMA

SH MFJ RM