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Abdullah-Dialogue

TOP FRENCH THINK-TANK NOW UNDERSTANDS M'SIA MORE DEEPLY

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

PARIS, July 22 (Bernama) -- A top political and economic think-tank in France has come away with a deeper understanding of Malaysia on a wide range of issues confronting the country and region following a frank and freewheeling dialogue and debate with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

In what can be described as their highly-receptive stance towards Abdullah's viewpoints and candour, the French Institute of International Relations greeted with warmth his forthright explanations on a host of issues.

On his part, Abdullah, who is on a visit to France, came through with flying colours.

He comprehensively tackled such diverse topics as Islam and secularism, bilateral issues, fast-growing China, Myanmar's lack of democratic reforms, Asean as well as global trade with emphasis on the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

From lacking a clear and deeper knowledge of Malaysia, Asia and issues affecting both, participants came away with a better understanding of the complexities affecting Islamic and developing countries in a space of two hours.

What was notable was that the 58 participants comprised a good mix of people from French parliamentarians, to journalists, corporate captains and intellectuals, all of whom came to discourse with the new person leading Malaysia.

The institute hosts such interactions with heads of state and government and other personalities as many as 200 to 300 times a year.

Also present was Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and

Malaysian Ambassador to France Datuk Hamidah Mohamed Yusoff.

The first question was on Islam, on the clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, for which Malaysia has tread successfully and carefully with both and without antagonising any one party.

He said that Malaysia was a moderate, progressive Islamic country practising democracy and was economically active while being home harmoniously to a sizeable non-Muslim population.

He told the French participants at a luncheon at the Automobile Club of Paris that the country was multi-ethnic, multireligious and multicultural where "we celebrate diversity which gives us the strength, the moderation and mutual respect to think about the others."

Despite the diverse background, he said that the government had been extremely successful in power-sharing and that the comfort level between leaders in the country was very strong and very high.

Abdullah, who won a strong mandate in the last general election and was elected unopposed as president of Umno, the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, underscored the fact that in all these, political leadership is very important.

"We are an Islamic nation at no social costs, there is no new agenda of Islamisation," he said in obvious reference to many Islamic countries which were torn by civil strife marked by political instability.

The Prime Minister also stressed the fact that "Malaysia does not tolerate extremism, we talk about justice and equality, something which some Western countries are concerned about as they link it to terrorism."

The participants also asked Abdullah about secularism and he responded by saying that "it (extremism) does not exist in Islam because Islam is a way of life."

Touching on the problems of Islamic countries, he said it should not be blamed on Islam but rather on bad leadership and bad politics. "Ours is a showcase of Islam that is tolerant, modern and progressive," he said of Malaysia.

To a question on what he has emphasised most since taking over as Prime Minister, Abdullah said it was economic development and human capital development.

The discussions also touched on friendship between Malaysia and France, which he described as important given the very good working relationship between former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and French President Jacques Chirac.

"I share the vision for stronger bilateral relations between France and Malaysia and there is a lot of scope for greater economic cooperation," he said.

Abdullah is scheduled to attend a luncheon with Chirac Thursday.

On Myanmar and the European Union's isolation of the Indo-Chinese country for its poor track record in democracy and house arrest of Opposition democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Abdullah said: "We shouldn't allow the bigger picture to be lost and constructive engagement with Myanmar remains Asean's way."

He also said that Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos needed capacity-building and that Asean countries have worked well to keep peace in the region.

As for China, whose fast-growing economy many countries feared, the Prime Minister said Malaysia saw it as an opportunity and not as a threat.

"China is a challenge, so we have to be more competitive, be more hi-tech and be a market for high-end products and strive to find niche areas for ourselves," he said.

"China is a good friend of Asean," he said.

As for the WTO global talks, he said it was very difficult, which was why free trade areas (FTAs) were sprouting up as it "seems to be easier to negotiate on a bilateral basis than on a multilateral basis."

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