

29/02/2004

First there was Mahathir, and now there's Abdullah

Ahmad A. Talib

THE two Indonesians I met at an international marketing seminar a few days ago were envious of me. It was not the new Nehru jacket that I was wearing, for sure.

Demis and Dudi were just as dapper in their black suits and matching ties. They were envious because I am a Malaysian and because Malaysians had Mahathir and now "Badawi".

Let me explain. Demis and Dudi are newspapermen and newspapermen by nature seldom say what they don't mean. They often say what they mean and mean what they say.

"Yes, you are lucky. Malaysia is lucky. We envy you...kami irihati dengan anda. First you have Dr Mahathir. Now you have Badawi. Mereka ini hebat. You are lucky, my friend..." one of them said.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who became Prime Minister in 1981, retired last year and was succeeded by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Demis and Dudi said the two leaders have made Malaysia a much-respected nation. They said Malaysia is blessed with visionary and pragmatic leaders.

My conversation with the two Indonesians was short but they offered candid opinions of our country and leaders. They were genuine in their praise.

"You have great political stability. You have peace and harmony. This has helped you to grow and prosper economically. No country can succeed and make its people happy if the economy is weak. Your leaders are responsible for that. That's why we envy you."

I could only say thank you. I mean, what else can I say when others speak highly of our country and leaders. And they speak the truth too: I am not about to dispute such comments when there is ample evidence to back their observations.

By comparison, Indonesia has a different situation. In the last few years, the republic has seen no fewer than four presidents. Former army strongman Suharto, who left office amidst pressing economic problems and social strife, was succeeded by his vice-president, B.J. Habibie.

Habibie didn't last and was replaced by Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur as he is often referred to. Gus Dur, too, couldn't hold the country together, and was soon succeeded by the present chief, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Megawati, of course, is the daughter of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno.

Indonesia is a vast archipelago of 18,000 islands. It is spread so wide that only a strong leader with logistical and military support can hold it together. It stands a better chance if there's no external interference or pressure.

Friends who were in Jakarta, Bali and Bandung in the last few months came back with good reports of that country. Jakarta is bustling, they said. Much business is done in retail stores and the nightlife is alive and well.

Bali, which suffered greatly from the nightclub bombing in October 2002 which claimed 202 lives, is picking up the pieces. Hotels in Nusa Dua report better occupancy and foreigners find comfort in better security arrangements at the hotels.

Bandung, too, is seeing more Malaysian students registering in several faculties. The street stalls are full of people buying jeans, denim shirts and T-shirts. A few friends have also signed up as members of golf and

country clubs in Jakarta, Bali and Bandung.

We should really count our blessings. Viewed against all this political and social strife in many parts of the world, Malaysia is a haven for its citizens and others. You and I have a duty to see that the prosperity and peace we enjoy lasts.

Of course we are far from perfect. Then again, nobody or no nation is. People will still talk, no matter how hard we work to ensure continued success. Let them. As true Malaysians and having clearly benefited from sound policies and realistic leadership, we must ensure continuity in our pursuit of peace and prosperity, shared wealth creation and distribution, to earn our rightful place in the community of nations. Hidup Malaysia!!