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`Baton change' coming on smoothly

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HOW is the transition, for the transfer of leading the management of Malaysian economy, from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, going so far?

I believe that most Malaysians would reply: Impressive, so far so good!

Dr Mahathir's unprecedented 22-year premiership, has changed Malaysia from a poor agricultural country to an advanced developing country, significantly raised our living standards, and built a country that is respected internationally.

But steady and sustained socio-economic development is a long and strenuous process which most developing countries have failed to achieve.

Malaysia has by comparison succeeded enormously - but obviously there is much more to be done.

It is often conveniently forgotten that the industrial countries took hundreds of years to become developed. They also had the advantage of being able to exploit the rich resources of their colonies or forcibly occupied native lands, to reach their present advanced state of development.

We need more time to become an industrialised country.

The challenge for Prime Minister-to-be Abdullah, will be to give greater priority to human and social development.

These are the more difficult aspects of national development, especially since many of our national institutions have weakened in recent times.

One reason is that we have moved too fast too soon - in just 45 years.

But of course if we pursue the policy of meritocracy more seriously and widely, it is more likely that we could accelerate the process of attaining our Vision 2020 goals. At the same time we could also protect those who are genuinely in need of our affirmative action policies.

The challenge then is to strike the right balance, which we seem to have lost along the way.

We therefore need, even during this transition period, a stronger political will, to make the necessary changes, to restore socio-economic equilibrium, as follows:

* The first priority will be to further strengthen national unity. Polarisation has become worse and can cause economic and business uncertainty which can lead to socio economic decline.

Thus the Government's recent changes in its education policy, like the teaching of Maths and Science in English and the introduction of the mother tongues such as Chinese and Tamil in national schools, will go a long way to increase the multiracial composition in the national schools.

Already the recent survey under-taken by the Chinese education movement Dong Zong, indicates that the enrolment in the 60 independent Chinese schools has dropped by 4.3 per cent to 9,724 from 10,168 in Junior Middle 1 (or the equivalent of Form 1) in 2003, according to the Sin Chew Daily.

This is a welcome development, as it shows that the Government's new education policies are contributing towards the building of national unity.

It is possible that similar developments are taking place in the Tamil schools. But this has to be confirmed by similar surveys.

However, the Government will have to ensure that these vernacular languages are taught well and that the discipline and quality of education in the national schools are as high as the vernacular schools, to

encourage more parents to send their children to national schools.

* Secondly, during and after this political and economic transition, we see the importance of improving the balance in our international economic relations.

President Vladimir Putin, when he was recently interviewed by the NST assistant group editor Hardev Kaur, revealed some incisive insights which are worth considering.

He postulated the view that is shared by most Third World countries, that poverty provides fertile ground for terrorism. If Putin can convince the Group of 7 leaders of his wisdom, it may be possible to better manage and even reduce international terrorism, if not eradicate it.

But the Western world will find it difficult to accept the Russian line because that will mean giving the developing countries a fairer deal in the upcoming WTO negotiations.

Putin was also strongly against unilateralism. This must have been directly levelled against the Americans who have become extremely unilateral after the Sept 11 attack on the US.

In a multipolar world, Third World countries had far better prospects to succeed economically.

Thus we need to get closer to the Russians as they have shed their big power and domineering attitudes and are more empathetic to the aspirations of the developing world.

Similar logic applies to our economic relations with Europe, and especially with France and Germany.

Abdullah, the Prime Minister after October 2003, made some important policy pronouncements in Tokyo on July 10.

He announced that he is prepared to work closely with Japan that had supported the US-led coalition's unilateral war against Iraq.

Does this mean that he will have fewer problems working closely with the US?

Indeed, Malaysia would need to improve relations with the United States, but it may be difficult. However, we should continue, together with the rest of the world, to urge the US and the UK to reject their unilateralism and hegemonic policies.

The unproductive Singapore water spats should also be settled quickly. If meaningful negotiations won't work, then please go to arbitration soon. But to prolong this acrimony can only adversely affect both economies.

* Thirdly, regarding domestic economic management, Abdullah also emphasised in Tokyo: "Let me make it very clear that I intend to continue the domestic, economic, political, social, cultural and foreign policies that have been well established by my Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and that have been deeply institutionalised by Malaysia."

This has been the DPM's strongest assurance of continuity and it is very reassuring. It strengthens business confidence considerably.

But there have to be more drastic policies and serious efforts, to effectively and urgently combat the growing social ills of our society.

The deteriorating trends in corruption, crime, rape and social decadence, and the mismanagement and wastage of taxpayers' funds, are undermining the economy. We have to decide that "enough is enough".

All these threats to our socio-economic progress, including the poor public services and economic inefficiencies, must be addressed quickly, to strengthen this vital transition of leadership.