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Asean pays tribute to Dr M (HL)

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ASEAN yesterday paid tribute to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who vehemently advocated regionalism throughout his 22 years as Prime Minister, in an emotional ceremony at the Ninth Asean Summit here.

Holding back tears and choking on her words, Indonesian President and summit chairman Megawati Sukarnoputri bade farewell to Dr Mahathir, describing him as a "statesman and a steadfast friend".

"Today, we take the opportunity to say farewell to His Excellency Bapak Mahathir," she said.

"The mark of his statesmanship has been imprinted so deep in our consciousness that in a larger sense, he will always be with us.

"The reach of his mind is so far and wide that on every issue laid before us we will always try to recall what Dr Mahathir has said about it.

"He always had strong and informed views. He never hesitated to say the unpleasant."

Megawati said Dr Mahathir's contribution to Asean was immeasurable.

"Indeed, he was one of those who worked the hardest to articulate an Asean vision. That is why I can say with confidence that although Dr Mahathir will leave office, he will never abandon Asean.

"At anytime in future, when we are bent by the weight of enormous challenges, we can expect Dr Mahathir to be there, sharing his counsel and giving us the benefit of his wisdom and experience.

"I am sure we will not be disappointed."

In the 22 years, Dr Mahathir, who retires on Oct 31, has made various proposals for and contributions to regional development.

It was his Government that was instrumental in persuading other Asean members to admit Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia into the grouping.

Vietnam was admitted in 1995. The decision to admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar was taken during Malaysia's chairmanship in 1997.

Asean members were apprehensive about accepting the four because they were afraid that these less-developed countries would impede the region's economic growth.

Some feared that by accepting Myanmar, derided by the West for alleged democracy violations, Asean would face retaliation from world powers.

Under Dr Mahathir's chairmanship of Asean, Japan, South Korea and China were invited to attend the Asean Summit as partners, which later evolved into the Asean+3 forum, a de facto East Asian Economic Grouping first proposed by the Prime Minister in 1990 but opposed by the United States.

Asean+3 is now a permanent forum and the 13 countries now agree that there is a need for an East Asian Grouping.

To enhance regional integration, it was Dr Mahathir who proposed the 5,500km Asian railway line linking Singapore and Kunming in China.

Malaysia has contributed RM2 million for the feasibility study for the multi-billion dollar project, which will facilitate travel and improve relations among peoples in the region.

The Asean Vision 2020 is modelled after Malaysia's Vision 2020.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said he felt special to be honoured by his counterparts in Asean.

"I have had the privilege of attending most of the Asean summits. During these years, I have seen many changes take place in Asean.

"Today, it encompasses the whole Southeast Asia and it is one of the most successful regional organisations," he said.

Dr Mahathir said although in its early years Asean had been written off as an irrelevant organisation, it had proved its critics wrong.

"How else can we explain the willingness of countries in Northeast Asia and South Asia to hold dialogues with us? In fact, many outside the region have expressed the desire to be a member of Asean," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir reminded Asean that it should not rest on its laurels.

"We need to address our challenges squarely ...we need to have the political will and commitment to continue to nurture and nourish Asean into an Asean community.

"Here, we can take a leaf from the process which led to the formation, ultimately, of the European Union."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia, as a founding member of Asean, remained committed to the regional grouping, adding that while it remained open and progressive, it must continue to deepen relations with East Asia.

"An East Asian community, with Asean at its core, is inevitable. It is important that we as Asean play our part to drive this co-operation in the right direction."

He also told Asean members they should not disregard nor erode Asean's principles that had kept the members together.

"The principles of non-interference, consensus-based decision making, national and regional resilience, respect for national sovereignty, the renunciation of the threat of the use of force in the settlement of differences and disputes, must always be upheld by Asean countries," he said.

Megawati later presented Dr Mahathir with a framed picture of the leaders present, which was taken earlier in a photography session.