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Asia will have to change (HL)

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ASIA must rid itself of its historical baggage if it is to play a role in shaping the new world order, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told an international symposium.

Asians, he added, must also learn to be more critical of ideas and concepts coming out of the West.

"If Asia cannot do this, then it is most unlikely to play a meaningful role in the shaping of a new world order," the Prime Minister said in his address titled "The Asian dimension under the new world order - evolving paradigms in Asia and Japan" at the 15th anniversary symposium of the Institute for International Policy Studies here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said that at the moment, Asians appeared not to be psychologically prepared to play their role in international affairs. They tended to defer to the Europeans. Perhaps this was a relic of the old European domination of Asia, he said.

The ideas, values and systems that had been accepted by the world were of European origin. Europeans claimed their values were universal and that there was no such thing as Asian values. And if there was, then those values must either be wrong or inferior, he said.

(Dr Mahathir had earlier explained that Europeans were people of European extraction, whether they now called themselves Americans, Canadians or Australians.)

The nation state is a European concept, he said, along with ideas about human rights, freedom and democracy. And now Asians were being told to accept borderlessness and globalisation, which effectively deny the independence of nations.

"And Asia does not protest," he said.

The Prime Minister said Asians had never reversed a concept promoted by Europeans. They felt guilty for not acceding to "universally accepted" values and ideas shaped by European propaganda.

And when Europeans reversed their ideas, Asians felt bound to accept them too.

"It would seem that Asians are not merely bereft of ideas but they suffer from a mind block that prevents them from critically examining the thoughts of Europeans and, when necessary, from rejecting them," Dr Mahathir said.

He pointed out that some European ideas were harmful, such as market liberalisation and deregulation. The world's economy had been growing quite well before liberalisation and deregulation in a borderless world were mooted.

Indeed, Japan's rapid recovery and the growth of Korea and Southeast Asia owed nothing to trade liberalisation and the "rule-based" trading of the free market.

Dr Mahathir said Asians did not question the idea of free trade and the accompanying changes, but accepted them. Many ardently believed that they were good in themselves.

"Even after their prosperous economies were destroyed by this regime, they did not alter their commitment."

The irony was, most European countries rejected free trade when it hurt them, he said.

They did not hesitate to bail out their hedge funds, automobile industries and airlines. Their farming was strongly protected. Threatened,

they imposed countervailing duties and other non-tariff barriers.

In no uncertain terms, Dr Mahathir told his audience of government officers, industrialists, bankers, trade leaders and academicians:

"It is clear that the systems and regime promoted by the Europeans are not binding upon them.

"It is also clear that they do not hesitate to ignore their own paradigms if it suits them.

"Yet Asians still maintain their faith in these European-initiated ideas even if they suffer continuously from them."

Showing Asia the way forward, the Prime Minister said Asia need not conquer or dominate to have its values and ideas accepted. For instance, Japan's formula for success had prompted other countries in Asia to adopt it in their own free will.

He said many good ideas had come out of the West. But the West had time and again been proved wrong. That was why some ideas had been discarded in favour of new ones.

This, Dr Mahathir said, showed that all ideologies and formulas for systems were imperfect.

They failed because of the excesses of those who practised them.

Inviting the audience to take a moment and think deeply, he asked: "Should we wait for them to fail at tremendous cost to the world community or should we now critically examine these ideas with a view to modifying or replacing them?"

"It is in this process that Asians can contribute. Asians have their own way. We should not try to impose our way as the Europeans have.

"We should devise our own systems and prove their goodness by applying them to ourselves first.

"If we are successful, then others will follow. If we fail, then we should be prepared to modify those systems or reject them."

He remarked that nearly all rich countries had reneged on their promise to contribute 0.7 per cent of their gross domestic product to help poor nations.

And so the poor remained poor and the rich, rich.

"The poor should not, of course, believe that the world owes them a living.

"But, on the other hand, if the rich became rich by exploiting the poor either directly or indirectly, then it is only fair that the rich help raise the poor from their debilitating poverty."

Dr Mahathir pointed out globalisation had effectively made the whole world a single country, and that in a modern country, it was accepted that the rich pay taxes that were then distributed to the poor.

"Is it not right then that rich countries contribute to the development of the poor countries?" he asked, while acknowledging that the rich were right in not wanting the money they contributed to be squandered by inefficient governments.

Dr Mahathir recalled a proposal he made at a conference in Boao, China in 2001, which met with "deafening silence".

He had proposed an infrastructure tax to enable poor countries to build ports, airports, railways, roads and provide all its people water and electricity.

"I am not asking that Asians take up my suggestion.

"But if we want to give an Asian dimension to a new world order, then the focus should be away from maximising profits for the already rich and be instead, on maximising benefits for the poor."