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Breathing new life into NAM

Rozi Ali

THE Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was conceived from the ideological womb of the 1955 Bandung Conference, where Asian and African nations debated their future in a global order marked by the capitalism/communism binary and the big-power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet-China bloc.

NAM was born in 1961. In the 1960s, capitalism was prosperous in the West but a third of the world had broken off from capitalism. Despite the discredit of the Stalinist orthodoxy in 1956, socialism was a dynamic reality for the oppressed. The prestige of Maoist China was largely intact.

The Cuban Revolution was a new beacon in Latin America. Vietnam was successfully fighting the US. Revolutionary romantics like Khrushchev grew in numbers as did the literary brothers-in-suffering such as Fanon, Satre and Althusser.

The intellectual enterprise of revising leftist and Marxist traditions took on aspects of a theoretical fever, producing classics such as Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution*. The defeat of mass politics from the era of Korsch and Gramsci gave seeds to alternative strands: Trotskyist, Maoist and Luxemburgist.

Against these ideological forces, NAM defined itself in terms of principles: Stand up against imperialism and colonialism, stay from bloc politics and nobly attempt to have a constructive say in global politics.

But decades later, the environment in which NAM took shape has completely passed away. The Soviet bloc has dissolved. Socialism has ceased to be a widespread ideal. Marxism in its doctrinal or orthodox sense is almost dead, its force in the Left's culture replaced by new thoughts. China has integrated into the capitalist market.

Globally, neoliberal economics and representative democracy are embraced as the definitive form of politics, even by the traditional Left. Imperialism as a current historical reality has disappeared from the political lexicon, mouthed only by the likes of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. America has successfully imposed its international hegemony as the model of democracy and economic success - its deregulated Anglo-Saxon system (espoused by the World Bank and IMF) - and progress is identified with free capital flows and liberalisation.

Underneath the rubbles of the South-east Asia financial crisis in mid-1997, one logic prevails: The international movement of capital is the only option, the only possible paradigm. The logo of this process of imposition of American hegemony at ideological, economic and cultural levels - or what Dr Mahathir called the new imperialism - is globalisation.

And while developing nations understand the tide of globalisation is irreversible, they know the limits of their so-called democratic participation in the World Trade Organisation. It is no coincidence that the most ambitious theorisation of ultra-capitalism as a global order - Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive-Tree* (voted by Financial Times as one of 20th century's important books) - should be a brazen paean to US global hegemony.

Those who were once excited by Tony Blair's intellectual guru, Professor Anthony Giddens' *Third Way* or by the prospect of an European Union dominated by social democracy have realised that it is a mouthpiece of neoliberalism. Despite calls for a reform of the international financial

architecture and solution on issues on globalisation, what is happening now is the uncontested consolidation and universal diffusion of neoliberalism.

So the world has moved on. But what of NAM? Who could forget the knife that sliced through NAM's belly when Argentina's Foreign Minister Guido di Tella in 1992 said, "We decided that NAM was nonsensical at least for Argentina, and probably nonsensical for many".

NAM, however, will not sign its death sentence. The Kuala Lumpur 13th Summit sees it devoting itself to the revitalisation of the movement and thus, it will be one of the most important summits in NAM's history. But what should this new or revitalised creature be?

Nothing grows out of a vacuum. NAM is surrounded by the ideological forces of neoliberalism, the most successful ideology in world history now, and the anti-globalisation and anti-unilateralism protests. From Porto Alegre (the recent World Social Forum was hailed as the 21st century's Bandung Conference) to Jakarta, people are questioning neoliberal globalisation and unilateralism. Should NAM be blind to the fact that these protests - some been used to validate a new Left - point towards the making of an entirely new ideological, political and geographical design?

The only starting point for a revitalised NAM today is a lucid registration of the shift in this ideological climate - for the shift necessitates it to express a position on these wide-ranging issues. True, some issues on the neoliberal order have been voiced, mainly by Malaysia, in the 12th NAM Summit in Durban, South Africa. But it was only a prelude to things yet to happen.

Non-alignment does not mean working in an ideological vacuum or a conscious distance from the issues that would pit itself against US imperial dominance. Even if NAM wants to renounce "grand narratives", how can it possibly construct new subjectivity in the struggle for a post neoliberal order without entering the ideological terrain?

NAM's fight for peace, equality, development and justice must see a concrete search for an alternative go beyond institutional discourse. Where it can distinguish itself from the new Left is that its proposed alternative comes from within the metabolism of capital itself. For we can't turn away from capital and only in the evolution of this order we might stumble upon the secrets of a better and equal one.

It is ironic that a movement conceived from the suffering spirits of the people - as embodied in the Bandung Conference - should be almost divorced from people participation. It is now confined to government-to-government perspective. While it sees the cultural, literary and arts add-on and an ASLI-organised Business Forum, there are no parallel people's meetings. NAM should also be a meeting place for "civil society". Consider the fact that non-governmental organisations have been used as agents for neoliberalism.

This is not to say there should be demonstrations nor should civic society be understood in terms of civil society/state opposition. It should be a forum which includes the ordinary citizens, NGOs and the entire civic bodies. Why should Porto Alegre hijack the spirit of Bandung Conference from NAM?

Any exclusion of the people would limit the formulation of answers and even alternatives to the injustices of neoliberal globalisation and unilateralism and any proposal would be reduced to a for-further-action filing. The cultural, arts and literary injection should be more than for revelry.

NAM's relevance and revitalisation lie in creating new spaces where forces and people can come together. It must represent a qualitatively new

alignment of forces and strategies for change.