

08/06/2003

## Democratising the new world order

THE Prime Minister's speeches in Tokyo last week can be viewed as variations of his critique of a Eurocentric vision of an international society rooted in a worldview with pretensions to universality. He not only challenges the celebratory rhetoric of Western neo-liberal ideology which propagates free-market globalisation and unfettered democracy, but also provides antidotes and alternatives.

As Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out, one of the key global issues is governance. The vital question is, will Asia have a democratic voice in the international community, or will a small group of rich Western countries and international institutions like the IMF and WTO, working in concert with giant multinational corporations, dictate terms? To Dr Mahathir, the answer is clear: a new world order should not be left to Western countries to decide. Asia must act together to demand a say. But the problem is that Asians carry "the baggage of the past", in the form of "past quarrels and wars, the atrocities and the shame of foreign rule". This is why "a united Asia is unthinkable" and talk of an "Asian Century" unrealistic.

Asia has been a victim of Western imperialism and could well be again. The end of the colonial empires did not lead to prosperity for all, or the dawn of democracy, or the end of Western domination. Countries that have become independent of their old masters have fallen under the tide of capitalist globalisation and a post-Cold War international political order characterised by the hegemony of the United States, which is at once an empire and a democracy. As Dr Mahathir said, Asia "is now being exhorted to become more democratic". However, democracy is not an insurance against oppression. In democracies in which governments must account for their acts and where a legal opposition exists, it should be more difficult to pursue a policy that can lead to war. But the recent invasion of Iraq shows that this is not always the case. As an imperial republic, the US has been a defender of despots and an accomplice of the enemies of democracy all over the world.

Nevertheless, democracy may be viewed as an ideal, but it can become a universal political form only when each nation is able to adapt it to its own genius. More-over, the Western and Japanese experiences show that the transition to democracy is usually long and difficult. Half a century into the Meiji era, Japan had become a strong economic and military power, but it took a detour through militarism and imperialism before democracy took firm root.

It is not for nothing that "Look East" became a key element of Dr Mahathir's policies. The Japanese assimilated Western sciences, technologies and institutions but showed originality in adapting them. Although, as Dr Mahathir said, the "Japanese people have been accused of being copycats", what initially began as imitation has become authentic Japanese creation. In the same manner, it "is not impossible for Asians to accept and blend their ideas with those of the Europeans and others. The result would still reflect Asian inputs and an Asian contribution to a new world order".

A commitment to democracy means that every nation should be able to make its own contribution to a new world order. Asians need to rid themselves of the baggage of economic, political, media and intellectual dependence on the West. With pragmatism, imagination and flexibility, it would be

possible to provide an Asian dimension to a globalism which would be at once radical and in accord with Asian traditions.