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Dr M: Region must think for itself

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Southeast Asian nations must learn to think for themselves if they are to create an impact on the world, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here today.

The Prime Minister said rather than conform to standards, practices and way of life that were demanded by others, nations in the region should re-examine conventional thoughts and formulate things which were beneficial for them.

"I think if you talk about leadership in Southeast Asia, it's time Southeast Asia thinks for itself," he said at the inaugural opening dinner and dialogue of the Asia Inc forum on Leadership for Southeast Asia.

Present were more than 100 corporate, political and non-governmental organisation figures from Southeast Asia, the United States, Hong Kong and Australia, as well as Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, the Prime Minister's wife.

"Don't do what is normally expected of you; have some surprises.

"I believe that Southeast Asia can make an impact, not only in the region or in Asia but throughout the world if we learn to think for ourselves and do what is good for us."

Dr Mahathir said leadership in its true context should provide challenges and not follow the same path that had been taken by everyone.

"Leadership means, to me at least, to create something that is slightly extraordinary, off the beaten track.

"Sometimes, of course, you fall over the cliff but you have to climb out again. Quite often taking the other path might give you some advantage and might help you achieve what you want.

"If leaders point in the same direction as everybody else is going, I don't think there is much to be said about such leadership. Anybody can point in the direction that everybody is going.

"If you want the leadership to do that (follow in the same direction) we can do without leaders, at least some of the leaders.

"I think it is a good thing if we question everything. We question everything that is conventional, everything that is normal and we question everything that we have been doing all the time."

Dr Mahathir said the concept of Japan Incorporated was condemned even though the collaboration between the Japanese Government and the private sector helped Japan's post-war recovery.

He said Malaysia took a radical step by emulating the Japan Incorporated concept and openly promoted Malaysia Incorporated, a close co-operation between the Government and the private sector, although such a co-operation was criticised as cronyism.

"We think that every business and businessman is the crony of the Government because when they do well we benefit through the taxes that we collect from them. So for us there is nothing wrong in such a collaboration.

"This kind of thinking comes from rejecting the conventional wisdom. There is no reason why we should not work with the private sector."

He added that Malaysia had prospered thus far due to the practice of re-examining everything and formulating new ways of doing things.

He said Malaysia challenged conventional wisdom during the 1997/98 currency crisis and emerged from the disastrous situation and continued to grow due to such thinking and approach.

Dr Mahathir explained that doing things the unconventional way was not new in Malaysia as even the first Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman, took the initiative to build a strong multiracial nation.

At the dialogue, the Prime Minister was asked a host of questions - how he had managed to bring Malaysia to where it is today, the US war on terror, and the importance of maintaining the moderate way of life of Muslims in the region.

Acknowledging that maintaining moderation was something very challenging, Dr Mahathir said the challenge could be overcome only by speaking and promoting the truth.

"The war against Iraq for instance, if we blindly support the war although there exists genuine opposition with valid reasons, then the extremists would win and the moderates cannot do anything about it.

"So it is important to tell the truth, even if some nations may not be too happy with you," he said.