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Forming ties that bind

Chok Suat Ling

THIS year, Malaysia has the distinction of leading two international organisations representing almost two-thirds of countries in the world: the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

At this session of the OIC in Putrajaya, Malaysia is taking over the chairmanship of the organisation from Qatar.

The country's approach in promoting unity among discordant OIC members, and the steps taken to revitalise the organisation, will be keenly observed by the international community.

It is indeed a heavy responsibility, more so because OIC and NAM are organisations of developing and poor countries, with a melange of attendant problems.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, in an interview, acknowledged that many expectations have been placed on Malaysia as OIC chairman.

He said it would not be an easy task to fulfil as the road ahead for the OIC was rife with challenges.

"The OIC is now at a crossroads. Malaysia has a tremendous task ahead of it. This is the first OIC meeting after the events of Sept 11 and the world has changed so much. We have chosen Knowledge and Morality for the Progress of Ummah as our main theme and we hope to be able to work together with OIC members to meet all the new challenges."

He listed the challenges as, among others, achieving unity in the Muslim world, uplifting the image of Islam and preventing the Muslim community from being marginalised, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the invasion of Iraq.

"The Islamic world feels it is being marginalised and targeted. Amid all these challenges facing Muslims and Islamic countries, we need to have a correct response.

"We must uplift the image of Muslims so that people not only understand Islam, but are aware of what we can contribute to help secure peace, prosperity and stability in the world."

For that, OIC member countries must be united.

In this regard, he said a consensus on the "thorny issues" of Iraq and the Israel-Palestine conflict would be sought among the members.

On the situation in Iraq, he said Malaysia believed in a multilateral system and it wanted the United Nations to play a pivotal role in the reconstruction of Iraq.

This, however, has not yet been realised.

"The reason for the invasion of Iraq by allied forces has been proven baseless, its very justification questioned and debated. There is still no peace and stability in Iraq.

"The Iraqis are not better off and the allied forces are being attacked every day. So, the promise of delivering democracy and peace has not been fulfilled."

As for the continuing Israel-Palestine conflict, the situation appears to be worsening.

He said the two issues would "provide some of the undercurrents in the meeting".

"We will come up with a separate statement on the Israel-Palestine conflict but we are not sure about Iraq yet. This is a question that has to be decided by the OIC general body."

Stressing again the need for OIC countries to be united, he said it was the only way the organisation would gain the respect of the international community.

In this regard, he said, the organisation needed to be revitalised and revamped, and the Putrajaya Summit will serve as an "opportune moment" for members to look at the restructuring of the OIC.

"This was a decision by OIC foreign ministers made three years ago: that the OIC needs to be revamped and revitalised to meet the new challenges.

"The OIC Secretariat came to a consensus that the organisation should be an effective body serving the interests of all its members. As such, we hope this time around members will look at the need for there to be unity and cohesiveness among the ummah.

"If we can achieve this, we will not just gain the respect of OIC members but also the international community."

One way of achieving unity was for member countries to form ties that bind in various areas. Forging closer economic co-operation is one way.

Member countries should also use their strengths to collectively overcome weaknesses faced.

This, he said, was why the summit this year included many margin programmes that were not political in nature aimed at developing greater collaboration among OIC countries.

"We have the OIC Business Forum, OIC Expo, cycling, and a science meeting to discuss collaboration in the sciences and information technology. It is a mixture of many other things besides the political agenda.

"We want to forge co-operation, and establish more effective networking so that we can work with each other better.

"We hope this multi-faceted approach will help bring greater unity and cohesiveness among member countries."

In terms of collaboration among member countries, there is still much room for improvement.

Intra-OIC trade, for instance, is still "very low", and there is ample potential for it to be harnessed and taken advantage of, he said.

"I think it is going to be interesting. We are introducing the ministerial meeting prior to the summit, which is interactive. The subject of gold dinar, IT, and creating unity among the ummah ... all these are attempts to give the summit a new outlook."

"Malaysia will not be able to achieve anything unless it has the co-operation of all OIC members. This is where the true spirit in achieving unity is: for us to co-operate with one another and use our strengths to work out whatever weaknesses we have. That is the way forward."

On whether there were plans to transform the OIC into an economic grouping like the European Union, or even Asean, he said it would be too ambitious.

The OIC, he said, was a loose association, a conference of countries with a charter.

"We have different economic systems and different levels of economic development. We do not have cohesive political systems.

"Turning it into something like the EU, therefore, will be too ambitious. If we are overambitious and try to do too many things, we will not succeed. So let us take small, small steps to find areas where we can cooperate and then move on."

He said preparations for the meeting had gone smoothly and the response from participating countries had been good.

All countries have confirmed participation in the meeting, and many heads of governments will be coming.

"This demonstrates their confidence in Malaysia, and I am sure the

confidence level in Malaysia's abilities will remain high even after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad retires at the end of the month.

"They know Malaysia is successful and politically stable. We have sound principles, and consistent foreign policies. And when Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over, it will not be a change of regime, but leadership.

"Everything is there. Abdullah is also not a new kid on the block. He has been with Dr Mahathir and the Government for a long time. He has been a minister holding several portfolios and has vast experience.

"I am sure confidence will not be affected because of the change in leadership. The Government will, after all, continue to be run by Barisan Nasional."

He hoped all Malaysians would contribute in their own way to make the summit a success.

"I hope they will consider it a Malaysian project and work together to make it a memorable and successful one.

"In terms of preparation and logistics, we have taken great pains to ensure the meeting's success, and to make our visitors feel welcome.

With that, he is confident the Putrajaya summit will proceed like clockwork, and the country will emerge a triumphant host.