

14/11/2003

How foreign policy may change under new PM

Mohamad Reaz

WHAT will be the shape of Malaysia's foreign policy under the Government of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi? Turning the pages of history, one can see the evolution of our foreign policy priorities under the different Prime Ministers.

Under Tengku Abdul Rahman (1957-70), we had a markedly anti-Communist and pro-Western posture, forging close links with the Commonwealth countries.

When Tun Abdul Razak Hussein took over the reins of the government (1970-76), emphasis was placed on forging greater regional co-operation and participation with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), marking a need to reach out to countries beyond the Western bloc.

In the third phase under Tun Hussein Onn (1976-81), we intensified our regional co-operation, especially with Asean. When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister, it was perhaps the first time that economic considerations were prioritised in our foreign policy, and co-operation with developing countries was intensified.

With the ascension of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the top post, one can expect a shift of emphasis in our foreign policy priorities based on the changes in the internal and external environment.

One issue that has grabbed headlines from Kuala Lumpur to Cairo is globalisation. It has become a buzzword at coffee table talks and international conferences. But the reality is that not everyone is connected with the global network.

The majority of mankind is limping outside the walls of the select global network erected by the high, mighty and rich nations, effectively shutting the rest out of the dynamic flows of global trade, finance and investment, as well as the connectivity and wealth of knowledge that ICT offers.

Correcting the wrongs of globalisation will, therefore, likely become a foreign policy priority, especially as Malaysia is seen as a champion of the developing countries. At the same time, the Prime Minister will have to ensure that our national sovereignty is not knuckled under the growing pressure of globalisation.

Terrorism is an age-old phenomenon but has now emerged with a ferocious, headline-grabbing vengeance. Malaysia has had its painful share of terrorist-inspired atrocities perpetrated by the Communists since independence, but it was then largely a domestic problem.

The current play of terrorism is international, even global. The relentless fight against cross-border terrorism is, therefore, likely to continue unabated as a foreign policy priority. Malaysia, as an open economy and trading nation, is highly dependent on the international flows of trade, investment and tourists, and cannot afford the calculated carnage wrecked by the terrorists on life and property.

The potentially powerful voice of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in international issues cannot be ignored. But the body has to be reformed to meet the current needs and realities. As the present chairman of the movement, we are likely to get more involved in NAM to resist the pressures of the major powers, sustain our independence and oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism in its various insidious forms.

Through NAM, it would be possible to push our views on pressing international issues, including the reconstruction of a fair and equitable

international economic order.

Current global developments have compelled Islamic countries to defend their interests, nationally and collectively. It cannot be denied that a well-knit and united Islamic coalition presents a vast, yet untapped, political and economic resource, not only for the Islamic countries alone but also for other countries.

In this regard, and as the current chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), it is likely that we would enhance our relations with the OIC member countries for mutual benefit, especially with a view to giving the OIC a strong hand and loud voice in international affairs.

At the bilateral level, it is possible to expect enhanced co-operation with countries such as Singapore, China, France and Russia, while maintaining the good relations with our traditional friends and with other countries. At the multilateral level, we are likely to further intensify our co-operation with the United Nations and involve ourselves more in the World Trade Organisation to defend our position as a developing economy.

I will venture to add another point, which I think would be important in the near future: improved economic and intellectual relations with India. India is a giant, albeit half-awake economy with vast potential, home of software development in the East, as well as an emerging military power.

One sixth of the world's population lives in India, which also has a large middle class of perhaps more than 10 times our population. It also has a vast pool of talent. This is something we cannot ignore and should take advantage of.

Abdullah is unlikely to make sudden, drastic changes in our foreign policy, as it has served us well. He would, however, make the necessary policy adjustments to ensure that Malaysia, as a developing Islamic country, is able to address the current international and global realities.