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West must not perpetuate dishonesty

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I HAVE endless arguments with friends near and far about the idea that democracy in the developing world is the sure path to damnation although paved with good intentions.

It is hard to win converts in such arguments - such being the power of conventional wisdom. Most people are just comfortable going along with the general flow of global trends and thoughts.

But there is also a sizeable group of contrarians like myself in many parts of Asia - I'd like to think it is a silent majority - who, for various reasons, are not prepared to give public vent to their views, especially in the presence of Westerners.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at least has the conviction and courage that he is speaking "the truth" when he regularly articulates similar arguments - to widespread if often muted resonance all over the globe.

The "truth" being such a loaded term in our polarised world with a million shades of grey in between, I will nevertheless not hold out that what I believe true is the absolute and unchanging truth.

Nevertheless, taking a leaf out of the Maoist injunction to "seek truth from facts", I think I have come across - through reading and extensive travel within the region - enough compelling (even overwhelming) empirical evidence to support my conviction. So unless such evidence changes or as yet undiscovered new light is thrown on it, the "truth" which I hold on to remains unshakeable.

To begin with, let us get certain historical facts out of the way. Today's rich and developed countries in Western Europe and North America did not become "free and democratic" on a clean sheet of paper.

They got to where they are now through their own sordid eras of robber barons, slave-owners and colonisers. So, there is no need for today's self-appointed guardians of freedom and democracy coming from the West.

Now look at all the "new" countries which have since made good. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Chile and, now, China itself.

They all "arrived" on the back of an authoritarian streak of varying, sometimes doubtful, benignity. Even post-war Japan has been a virtual oneparty state with a veneer of elections and, therefore, "democracy".

Is it any wonder that perhaps the strongest democracy in South America today is Chile, the only country there to have gone through its own phase of thorough, "tough-love" market-oriented reforms under General Augusto Pinochet?

What, then, to make of a country like the Philippines under the rule of Ferdinand Marcos from 1965 to 1983? That has to be the exception that proves the general rule.

There can be no modern-day defence of dictatorial rule unless such rule serves as a means to a much greater good - genuine political and economic reforms and institutional strengthening, which otherwise are impossible or difficult under the cut-and thrust of a free-wheeling democracy.

Those of us who intellectually disagree with the way the West now seeks to promote democracy around the world are not nor should they be coming in from the defensive angle. We are, if anything, the true defenders of democracy.

Democracy, it should have been fully realised by now, is the end-state

of a fully matured society. It has never been nor can it ever be the means towards that desired end-state.

The intellectual weight of the West, almost all of it targeted towards promoting such confusion between ends and means, backed up by gunboat diplomacy under the new guise of fighting international terrorism, is the root-cause of so much unnecessary misery in the world today.

Mass poverty in much of the world breeds massive corruption and political paralysis and creates a vicious cycle of mass resentment, cynicism and, eventually, violence.

All this while, the rich and powerful represented by the West seek to seduce, failing which to coerce, the wretched of the world to believe that what the West now enjoys is the product of democracy - when we know it is the product of something else altogether.

Such delusion on a grand international scale in the face of mounting evidence that democracy does not work as the means towards the desired common end of all humanity can no longer go on uncommented upon.

The evidence belies the intellectual dishonesty of much of the West. And if the West allows such dishonesty to perpetuate itself, we have no choice but to ascribe not benign but rather sinister motives to the West.