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Mahathir-Editor

ECONOMICS EDITOR PRAISES MAHATHIR'S ACHIEVEMENTS

MELBOURNE, April 16 (Bernama) -- A leading Australian journalist today praised the achievements of Malaysia, giving full credit to Prime Minister

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his outstanding leadership.

Writing in "The Age" newspaper, its economics editor, Tim Colebatch, said that not all Australians were aware of how Dr Mahathir had transformed Malaysia, adding that Dr Mahathir was "a leader who brushes aside conventional thinking, plans for the long term, and makes those plans become reality".

"Looking down over the forest of stylish skyscrapers, parks and freeways that is Kuala Lumpur today, it is hard to believe that 30 years ago Malaysia was a Third World country where most people were poor farmers and exports were mostly rubber and tin," Colebatch said.

It is now an upper-middle-income country, one of the world's 12 largest manufacturing exporters, where virtually every child grows up well-fed, well-schooled, with a TV set, safe water and good health care, and to be middle-class means owning a car and a home computer, he said.

He said further, "even on the bumpy ride of the past 10 years, the economy has grown almost twice as fast as Australia's, close to 7 per cent a year. That will be hard to sustain in future".

He said, "with real incomes per head only a third of Australia's, Dr Mahathir's goal of catching up to the West by 2020 looks a big task. But failure would not be for want of leadership".

Colebatch, who has just returned here after being a guest of the Malaysian Government, said Dr Mahathir's thinking developed as a serious, even needy Muslim boy in a land under colonial rule.

His crusade today against free trade and the "neo-liberal religion" (economic rationalism) reflects a conviction that the West is still out to shape the world in ways it can dominate, ruling the markets of other countries as once it ruled their governments.

"His driving passion is to make Malays (and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese and Indian minorities) masters in their own house. But paradoxically, their economic success has come primarily from attracting a massive amount of foreign investment that has held unemployment below 5 per cent for years."

Colebatch said that as Prime Minister for 21 of Malaysia's 45 years, Dr Mahathir has had the prime responsibility for making government policies work.

"And those who criticise him on other issues agree that he has raised the competence of government in Malaysia, and done so by example," Colebatch said.

Colebatch said that when Dr Mahathir has taken on the conventional economic wisdom, as in 1998 when he imposed temporary capital controls and ended currency trading, time has generally proved him right.

"How long will he last? Now 76, he complains of feeling very tired, and looks it. Yet observers in Kuala Lumpur believe he will seek yet another five-year term, possibly at an early election next year," he said.

Colebatch said that Dr Mahathir had lasted so long partly because, for all his rigidity, he has altered course when circumstances warrant.

"He might need even more flexibility to meet the challenges of his final years," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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