

Learn to respect each other's culture

**Dr. Mahathir's
World Analysis**

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I HAD a bilateral meeting with French President, Jacques Chirac in Paris recently. We talked about economic ties between our countries as well as our links to Japan. We also discussed how Malaysia, France and Japan can help the development of human resources in African countries.

Chirac was very interested in how we overcame the economic crisis. He understood — and backed — Malaysia's need to introduce currency controls. I have known him a long time since the days he was mayor of Paris. He is open minded. He listens to people. He wants to know about

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people. He doesn't just lecture. He asks good questions — he asked how Malaysia avoided seeking International Monetary Fund assistance during the crisis.

I had lunch with him for about two hours. For Malaysians, we respect French culture and have no objection to them drinking wine or liquor during meals with us. We are fine with water or apple juice.

Even if the French serve wine, we just don't drink it. When we have guests coming from overseas, we propose a toast with apple juice. We don't serve alcoholic drinks in Malaysia or at receptions abroad. The only thing that we request when we are invited for dinner in other countries is that they should not serve pork — even for themselves.

We are brought up to think that pork is unclean and it upsets us to have pork served at our table. Most people, who are not Muslims know this and do not mind respecting our feelings.

We believe that we have to respect other peoples' culture so that they will respect ours. They respect you by not serving pork, but we respect that in their culture they

have wine with their meals.

We don't go around saying, “your way is wrong, our way is right”. But there is a limit. For example in Western culture, they accept homosexuality, including promoting homosexual practices among school-children. We cannot accept this.

We admit that some people are born with their sexuality mixed up. That is not their fault. But to promote homosexual practices actively as is being done in some European countries is to purposely promote abnormality. We will not accept this in our country as our religion is strongly against it.

In Europe homosexual ministers must be invited together with their same sex partners. That is their business. We will not invite them that way. They can come alone.

In a country in which 100 per cent of the population is Muslim, the application of Muslim laws is usually very rigid — even with foreigners. In a country where Muslims are a minority such as in Latin America, the Muslims cannot insist that non-Muslims cover their faces as would be done in a country in which 100 per cent of the population is Muslim.

Clearly the practices of Muslim injunction differ according to the circumstances. In Malaysia, we have lived with people of different races and religions for centuries. We learn by example, from our parents and others on how to conduct our relations.

We don't have any problems if our neighbours are Chinese or Indians and have different religious practices. We don't quarrel because our religious practices are different. On Malaysia's west coast, people are more used to mixing with different ethnic groups. On the east coast, the majority is Muslim and Malay — so they tend to be more rigid.

Their ability to tolerate other people is less. When Muslims are seemingly flexible they are not deviating from the teaching of Islam. Islam permits differences in practice according to the circumstances.

Although I am a Malay and a Muslim, that does not prevent me from admiring and wanting to copy the ways of others as long as they are not proscribed by religion. And so I admire Chinese culture and the teachings of Confucius with the stress on

filial piety, commitment to hard work, strong sense of community etc. The Chinese give less priority to immediate needs.

They think over the long term. And so they are willing to make sacrifices in order to gain later. That is why the Chinese have thrived and prospered wherever they are.

I also admire Western culture, which believes in organisation. For example, the Portuguese were able to conquer Malacca even though their forces were small. They were better organised and the line of command was clear. They were more disciplined and methodical.

On the other hand the army of the Malay Sultan was not properly organised, had no training and it was not clear as to who was in command. Although a bigger force equipped with elephants they were defeated by the Portuguese.

Besides being organised the Europeans are more methodical. In research they would examine every part and every possibility one by one instead of doing things at random.

Europeans are also curious and want to explore and find out things. And when they find something new they will want to study its application. Hence the advancements made in science by the Europeans.

When Japan occupied Malaya during World War II, the soldiers were very disciplined, brave and patriotic, which I admire. I used to sell goods in the market; Japanese soldiers always paid for all they bought.

The cultivation of good values that will

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contribute towards achieving one's goals is something that must be learnt by everyone. The younger generations must appreciate this if they wish to succeed. You cannot succeed by always wanting to do what you like or feel inclined to do.

In Indonesia, there are many different races and religions. After the crisis in that country, the situation has become very difficult. It is a country in transition. It has accepted democracy. Democracy is not so easily understood, nor practised.

People may not know the limits of democracy. Because of that, even if the government wants to introduce good things, it may not be able to do so. It will take time for Indonesia to resolve this difficult situation.

I have known Indonesia's General Wiranto for some time. He is a well trained, disciplined soldier. He shows quiet dignity as a military officer. I think the military anywhere should be professional and non-partisan and Indonesia's military can provide stability for Indonesia.

Without stability, it will be difficult for Indonesia to progress towards democracy. I think that the military will continue to play a diminishing role over the years, until Indonesian people master democracy. When everybody realises that this transition is difficult and are willing to make compromises, things will be all right.

The problem of Indonesia is that people lost a tremendous amount of wealth during the crisis. My belief is that you cannot be too rigid in trying to correct past practices that were bad.

Everything takes time. You cannot take money from somebody and say, "Now behave yourself". The only thing that person will do is to fight back. If a person has no money, there is nothing for that person to lose. He will be very irresponsible and aggressive.

The IMF can be more relaxed on things. They keep on saying that if you don't do this, we will not give you money. That is forcing the Indonesians to do things that may not be good for the nation. I think ethnic Indonesian Chinese should go back to Indonesia. They must learn to truly share the wealth of Indonesia with all the indigenous people.

At the same time, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia should have certain assurances that they will be protected from any violence. As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Malaysia worries very much about what is going on in Indonesia. We wish to see Indonesia once again stable and prosperous. It will be good for its Asean neighbours.

I also had a meeting with East Timor's Jose Alexander Gusmao, a man tipped to become the President of that nation together with Ramos Horta, his colleague. He is a friendly person. He talked about the kind of a country the Timorese wish to rebuild.

They need help to develop an administrative and a diplomatic corps. We have been helping out new countries like Commonwealth of Independent States in these fields. We are willing to do the same for East Timor.

As long as East Timor is stable, then it can reconstruct itself. I think they will be able to overcome their problems. They are interested in forgetting the past and to look to the future. Gusmao knows about Malaysia's development. He seems to think that Malaysia is a good model country. We are willing to help them.

□ *This is the 13th instalment of a monthly column of commentary and opinion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad which appeared in Japan's Mainichi Daily News yesterday.*