

## **Ex-Italian PM warns on dangers of nationalism**

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Former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta warned that the recent trend of rising nationalism in Europe, which is also occurring in Asia, can lead to negative outcomes that will cause problems for years down the road.

“I think nationalism is the worse feeling that we are experiencing today,” Letta told *Malaysiakini* on the sidelines of his presentation on the nascent Italy-Asean Association at Universiti Kuala Lumpur’s city campus on Friday.

He said this when asked to comment on his presentation speech, where he said nationalism was a hurdle to regional integration, in the context of the rising nationalism in Europe as well as a similar situation taking place in South-East Asia.

Letta explained that the rise of nationalism comes when errant politicians take advantage of worsening economic and social situations for political ends.

“There is some rise in nationalism because it is typical of the situation, when there is rising unemployment, social tension and lack of growth.

“And politicians without values and ideas will speak to the stomach of the voters, raising the fears of voters. They raise nationalism,” he said.

While he did not make any historical references, Letta’s descriptions matched that of Germany, pre-World War 2, with Hitler and the Nazi party Brownshirts running rampant, and perhaps even the rise of Mussolini and his Blackshirts in nationalist Italy at about the same time.

Such rabble-rousing, he related, would only lead to long-term issues, reinforcing his earlier presentation speech that national tension will only destroy the momentum of growth.

“The consequence of that is you will have negative outcomes for years and years, because nationalists raise enemies, create enemies.

“And so with the enemies you create a situation in which the tensions, between and inside the society, will create problems for a long period,” he said.

True enough, as Letta had opined, such a problem rising from nationalism can led to long-term problems for the country.

The nationalism in Germany and Italy practically led to World War II, with the armed conflicts creating difficult issues from which the world is still struggling to lay to rest.

## **The Mediterranean refugee crisis a more recent example**

Letta also gave a more recent example to explain his warning, pointing to present day Europe and the Mediterranean refugee crisis.

“In Europe, we experience tensions linked to the migrant crisis, and it has been until now one of the greatest problems. Because you know that when you have one million people coming in, it creates tensions with the local communities.

“And the local communities experience crises and rising unemployment and they immediately link these to the presence of migrants and refugees and these politicians, they immediately throw up the flag of nationalism,” he said.

Asked what he thinks would be the cure for rampant nationalism, Letta said that a country, or regional grouping for that matter, would need strong institutions to help counter rabble-rousing politicians, adding that this is why he believes the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), as a regional cooperative framework, is key to stabilising the region.

“So this is why I say; only the strength of institutions, the strength of multilateral institutions, can help us avoid the rising of such tensions. I think Asean is part of this process and this is why we have to strengthen, very much, Asean,” concluded Letta.

The former prime minister, who is now an academician heading the Paris School of International Affairs, is in the country for a three-day private visit, meeting with Italian businesspersons, their Malaysian counterparts, officials and the media, as well as members of the local academia and student bodies.

Letta is in Malaysia to promote and kindle bilateral trade, education, political and official cooperation between Italy and Asean under the ambit of the nascent Italy-Asean Association, which he also heads.

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