

Grooming a new breed of envoy

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COMMENT

By Deva Mohd Ridzam

IT was arguably one of the best foreign policy speeches in a long time. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi used the occasion of the envoys' conference last week to speak to Malaysians and the world about the precepts in which Malaysian foreign policy is rooted.

The speech summed up his reflections on foreign policy, diplomacy and international relations in the last 50 years and his thoughts as we prepare ourselves for the next half-century. It gave a fresh perspective and insight on issues affecting all Malaysians.

The message to Malaysians, diplomats and other stakeholders alike, was that Malaysia is a nation that is strong (19th most-globalised out of 62 countries in A.T. Kearney's Globalisation Index 2006) and also one that is distinctive because it is tolerant, diverse and confident. Malaysia's interest in the world is compelling and enduring.

The overarching theme was the intimate and essential link that exists between domestic priorities and foreign policy. It was all about jobs and economic growth, as well as a sense of our goals and purposes in the international context.

The prime minister made it clear that no country, big or small, could afford to insulate itself from the rest of the world and developments from which we cannot walk away.

He began by reminding Malaysians of the need to adjust to new global realities and compete yet co-operate in the world.

And to meet the growing competitiveness everywhere, Malaysia needs to develop its human capital.

While our total trade has surpassed RM1 trillion, Malaysia has fallen behind as other trading nations have been more quick to adapt to new factors in the global economy, characterised by "knowledge, creativity and innovation" as the main requirements for wealth creation. The traditional factors of "land, labour and capital" are passe in a changed global economy.

As long as it is held back by a less adaptable economy and weak human capital, Malaysia cannot be as effective as it should be in world affairs or in its domestic activities. A strong economy and quality human capital will build respect. Only then will Malaysia be listened to.

In an inter-dependent age and in a world in transition, countries need each other and must work together. The prime minister lamented the current crisis, bordering on a new international anarchy, in international affairs.

He stressed that multilateralism remained central to the promotion of Malaysian interests on the one hand



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at the Heads of Mission Conference: Time for root-and-branch reform of the diplomatic service.

and global peace and security on the other. The speech made a strong case for multilateralism based on and through the United Nations. This world body needs to be strengthened, not abandoned or ignored as irrelevant or inconvenient.

A stronger and more effective UN is necessary and needed more than ever before. No country, however powerful, in this day and age, should be able to impose its preferred solutions.

The principle of international law and the charter of the UN, universal in their application, should be the only option for global peace and security, which have to be collective and co-operative.

The prime minister attributed the current crises in international affairs to a flawed policy of "go it alone" (unilateralism) or a return to the law of the jungle, that is, not operating under the aegis of the UN and the rule of international law.

Malaysia is committed to multilateralism. And because the UN is so important, Malaysia will work in concert with other nations to make the world body effective.

A terrible wrong continues to be perpetuated in Palestine. The issue is as old as the UN itself. As if this were not enough, the same powers have today invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. Even Lebanon is not spared. It is a blatant and fla-

grant assault on global peace and security and on the inalienable rights of peoples.

The brutality inflicted on these countries and their peoples is nothing more than contempt for world public opinion, international law and common decency.

The systematic dismantling and destruction of entire Muslim countries and human rights abuses continue at a pace and on a scale with few precedents. All these and much more, in turn, are fuelling a schism between the West and Islam — an objective of the neo-conservatives working hand-in-glove with the Zionists.

In the last 50 years, there has been no equivocation or shift in position when it comes to principles. Malaysia will, therefore, not retreat from its principles and promises.

Be that as it may, a specific yet subtle message was directed at Wisma Putra and our diplomats: No more business as usual. They have to do more and do better. The status quo will not work.

This requires root-and-branch reforms of the diplomatic service. Wisma Putra needs to rebuild a new generation of diplomats, as it is clearly evident that our envoys in some missions overseas, including key ones, are not performing.

In other words, Wisma Putra today suffers from a paucity of talent and

expertise. The bureaucratic-speak for this sad situation is that we already are scraping the bottom of the barrel of competence.

There is also a clear misunderstanding of the requirements for diplomatic service. The common perception is that this service is interchangeable with the domestic civil service. This is a serious fallacy.

Diplomatic service is a lifetime vocation for a select group imbued with the natural inclination for networking, love of knowledge and passion for the job.

More importantly, in most countries, including Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt, to name a few, only the best, brightest and most talented are carefully chosen through competitive examinations for the service.

Indeed, our pioneers were selected through this route and then sent for intensive training abroad. In addition, they operated in a culture that challenged them to be resourceful, open-minded, engaging and intellectually stimulating.

Their career progression was scrupulously monitored and only those who matched expectations were sent abroad to represent the country.

Given the foregoing, recruiting new foreign service officers on a fast-track basis through "walk-in" interviews is a sure route to disaster. Have we forgotten the *isi penuh* exercise of

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the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the government recruited civil servants en masse? Today, we are paying the price.

It is, therefore, not a question of quantity to fill jobs, but of quality of people with the "temperament and skills", who will eventually represent the country with integrity and competence.

"Walk-in" fast-track recruitment exercises smack of choosing waiters and waitresses or sailors for the merchant navy to masquerade as diplomats. The foreign service and diplomacy cannot be about just serving customers, or "seeing the world". The service is very demanding indeed.

As the prime minister stressed, our current envoys and diplomats need to "draw inspiration from their predecessors" and "acquire sophisticated diplomatic skills and develop high expertise".

This must include solid apprenticeship, and mastery of English and other regional languages.

It is now up to Wisma Putra to take on Abdullah's directive and challenge to serve the national interest, or slide into irrelevance.

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