

## Outstanding Leader of Asia, Prime Minister Mahathir

**I**n my assessment, at least around 80% of 200 nations all over the world would be eager to learn from Korea the secret of the outstanding economic progress achieved in less than 40 years.

It is amazing to note that the per capita GNP has risen to US\$10,000 from what was US\$100, over taking many developing countries including Philippines, Indonesia and Turkey, which were doing better than Korea in 1960's.

In fact, the buoyant Korean economy has become a role model for many developing countries. Among such nations, Malaysia is a success story because they have a great visionary, Prime Minister Mahathir as their leader.

I admire him, for he is never tired of learning from Korea. He has visited Korea almost 10 times with a committed mission not only to study the resilient Korean economy but also to persuade Korean leadership to support his "Look East" policy and solicit Korean investments into Malaysia.

He told me in an exclusive interview for *Diplomacy* that Malaysia "Look East" policy is looking to Korea for establishing a very close relationship between both the countries. It is a well-known fact that Korea has made such a remarkable progress with in a short span of time and bloomed into almost fully developed country, but for the 1997 financial crises which has shaken all the Asian countries.

What is fascinating is Korea has recovered much faster and better than any other crises ridden countries, demonstrating to the world that Korea has the abilities to manage the crises and emerge as vibrant economy. Therefore, Malaysia must learn a lot from Korea as how to manage economy, how to industrialize and how to boost exports to brighten up its economy. It is for this reason Malaysia hopes to establish close rapport with Korea through Look East policy.

What impressed me was he did not implement everything learned from Korea. He kept away from the labor problems and the high wage structure of Korea implemented in 1992. I recall his statement made in an interview for *Diplomacy* in 1993. He emphasized that: "I feel we can learn a lot from Korea. But for a developing country like Malaysia to progress, we cannot afford to pay wages that are as high as the developed countries nor can we have too much industrial unrest."

Prime Minister Mahathir is a familiar and popular figure to the Korean people since he pushed an unique policy designed to save Malaysia from the effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The economic crisis prompted the other Asian nations, including Korea, to welcome the bailout program initiated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Mahathir has resisted the same and has been continuing to level criticism at the United States and the international agency.

He cherishes "Asian values" to distance himself and his country from capitalism-oriented "Western values." Despite his criticism of Western values, he has been called a business-oriented politician, as he employs aggressive means for promoting trade and investment relations with foreign concerns. No wonder, he did become a outstanding leader of Asia.

I am fortunate to have met this visionary almost 10 times in Korea in the last 20 years. I found in him a great patriot with a missionary zeal to compliment the growth of Malaysia into a hub of Southeast Asia.

He loves his people and his nation very much. He takes pride in the "Look East" policy and rejoices in his countrymen's achievements. I confidently say that Malaysian people are very happy and blessed because they have such a great leader, Prime Minister Mahathir.

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