

By : DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB TUN ABD RAZAK
Venue : NIKKO HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR
Date : 23-07-2004
Title : MSRC-KAF INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSE SERIES

Mr. Peter Schier, the Representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be here amongst such a distinguished audience. We are here today to discuss a subject that has confronted us all on a global scale. While there are some who would argue that this pre-occupation of ours dates from September 11, 2002, many others would also be quick to point out that terrorism has actually been with us for centuries. There are communities and countries that have faced the spectre of terrorism for decades and are still coming to grips with this terror. However, it cannot be denied that due to the impact of the attacks on that fateful day in September and the victim being the most powerful state on earth, we have become involved directly or indirectly. The subsequent terrorist acts in Bali/Spain and elsewhere, whether related or not, have indeed confirmed seriousness of the threat at the global nature that confronts us all today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Berlin Wall came crumbling down and almost overnight, the great divide between the East and the West disappeared, I can recall the euphoria that followed these dramatic events. People began to talk of peace and the world was hopeful that at last this is in sight. However, not too long, reality soon crept in, and the world was treated to another round of conflicts, beginning with ethnic cleansing and now terrorism.

While we could lament and moan as much as we want about the problems that we currently face, perhaps it is far more constructive if we look back in order for us to look forward. Confucius himself once said to study the past, if you would divine the future. While there will always be limits to learning from history as no two situations are the same, we must be aware of our history as it is our only point of reference which provides a window to our future. However, as a cautionary note, we must come to terms with our history if we want to truly learn from it. Doctoring the past will not be useful for us to learn for the future. The British writer George Orwell cautioned us when he said, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past".

In this regard, Malaysia has had its fair share of

experience in dealing with terrorism, both ideological and religious-based. In combating terrorism, Malaysia has accumulated a whole lot of experience. Despite this, we claim no expertise on how to handle terrorism as every terrorist act has to be seen in its contextual element. After all, terrorism is a tool not of the coward but of the weak, helpless and desperate. In fighting terrorism we must know the causes of such an act for if we do not, then we would end up applying the wrong remedy. It is critical and fundamental to get this right from the beginning of our battle against terrorism.

Malaysia became independent in a climate of fear, as the country was still in a state of Emergency. At the same moment, it was a time of hope. The new nation that was born in August 1957 was the kiss of death to the communists which had posed a direct threat to the country since 1948. It was the kiss of death because the communist propaganda machine was harping on the British colonial hold on Malaya. They saw themselves as liberators, freeing Malaysians from the shackles of colonialism. But, when London gave independence to Malaya, it immediately took the wind out of the sail of the communists.

From 1948 to 1989, this country had to deal with the communists, which employed various tactics, including terrorism, against us. While we have always kept them at bay and they never did pose a direct danger of installing a communist regime, they, at various times, had employed terror as a means to instill fear on the population of the country. Since the end of Emergency, there were spates of activities, in particular in 1974 and 1975 as well as in the later part of the 1970s. In 1975, for instance, among others, we saw the killings of senior police officers, including the IGP and the partial destruction of the National Monument, which was constructed to commemorate our victory against the communists during the Emergency. This resurgence of activities was believed to be tied to the victory of the Vietnamese over the fall of Saigon, which provided a morale boost to communists everywhere.

It was clear that we were successful in combating the communist terrorists because we approached the problem in a comprehensive manner. While one could argue that the current problem of terrorism are less easily identified as compared to the days when the communists took refuge in the jungles along the Thai-Malaysian border, the latter also had urban cells and had sympathizers that obviously assisted them in conducting their attacks on us.

We recognized from the beginning that to win the war it was just as important to use force against the perpetrators as to use the cliché, was to win the hearts and minds of the population. One cannot separate these two aspects. Hence a judicious use of hard and soft powers is necessary. After all the war against terrorism is also an ideological one. Apart from employing psychological operations to win over

the rural population, it was critical for development to reach areas where the communists operated. We believe one of the surest ways to isolate the population from the communists is to bring progress and conscious effort towards the equitable distribution of the nation's wealth must be instituted. In fact, we coined the acronym - KESBAN. In short addressing the legitimate grievances of the populace is imperative if we are to succeed. Also, the use of pre-emptive legislation the ISA.

It is interesting to note that following our success in fighting the communists, several states tried to emulate our experience, for example the Americans in Vietnam established strategic hamlets and were engaged in pacification programs, but they were not successful. The reasons for their failure have been well documented and debated over the years. The point simply is that we need to look at each situation carefully and while we can talk of the need to win the hearts and minds of the people, this must be done in its totality and as already stated, in the context of that particular political and socio-economic context.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Based on our experience, dealing with religious-based terrorism has been the biggest challenge facing our country because of the highly emotive nature of religion. It is clear in the history of humanity that men have been willing to die in the most fanatical way for the sake of religion. The most brutal and systematic extermination of groups throughout history, for instance during the Spanish Inquisition, have tended to be done in the name of religion. After all, perhaps it is no coincidence that the German philosopher, Karl Marx talked of religion as being the opiate of the people. Religion has been a powerful tool, and if misused and abused could have devastating impact.

Unfortunately, we have had to deal with this phenomenon. Often seen as gaining inspiration from the Iranian Revolution, we saw a resurgence of Islam throughout the Muslim world. This is most positive for it led to a revival of our Islamic consciousness and identity beyond our borders. However, it also brought to the fore the rise of radicalism, with all its unintended consequences.

In order not to dwell too much on the facts, which have already become part of Malaysia's history books, I would merely like to contrast two events and to illustrate how we have learnt from our own history. The first is the Memali incident while the second is the Sauk episode. Very briefly, both incidents were obviously different but they were similar as both involved the taking of hostages and laying siege on a village. However, we employed different approaches and they produced different results. During the Memali incident, we used force and stormed the village, resulting in bloodshed, while in Sauk, we adopted a far different approach, we gave them time to surrender,

although the use of force was always as option for us. Those involved were subsequently given a fair trial and sentenced according to the rule of law. As such no political fallout from the incident.

We have learnt that when dealing with religious groups, we need to be extra careful as emotions are often very high. More often than not, they tended to be far more willing to give up their lives when it comes to fighting for their religious belief eventhough they maybe erroneous than compared to other factors. Most of such groups are led by charismatic religious leaders who have mesmerized their followers through deviationist teachings, as least in the case of Malaysia. Elsewhere we have witnessed groups using and exploiting religion for their own political ends and interests.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Based on Malaysia's experience in dealing with terrorism, including, I should add, the isolated case of the Japanese Red Army's siege and the taking of hostages in the American Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 1975, what then can we learn for the future?

In dealing with terrorism, we need to adopt a comprehensive approach and in this regard, there are three elements. Firstly, a balance approached between the need to use force, secondly, hard and soft powers at the same time to take the soft approach, and finally, to also take a longer term perspective, in finding a solution, that is, to address the legitimate grievances and the ideological perspective which have forced such groups to engage in terrorism in the first place.

We need to address the issue of terrorism today as the danger is clear and present and immediate, which means to say that we need to resort to the use of force. It is futile to wear kid's gloves when confronting a professional boxer in the ring. Similarly, when you are faced with imminent terrorist threat, you have no choice but to take all the necessary precaution. In this regard we cannot appear to be weak or to appear to be appeasing the terrorists. Vigilance and being prepared are of utmost importance. Deterrence may or may not work, as some of the terrorists we have seen lately are clearly not deterred, especially when it comes to suicide bombers. Suicide bombers are nothing new as they are similar to the Kamikazes during the Pacific War. While the Kamikaze pilots believed that their death were seen as the supreme sacrifice for the Emperor, the present day suicide bombers are under the impression that upon death, they will go to heaven.

We all recognized the necessity of using force when dealing with terrorism. However, if not properly employed, it could be counter-productive and this could provide further impetus and even sympathy towards the terrorists. The ill-treatment

of captured terrorists and the use of unnecessary force could well prove to be precisely what the terrorists hope would be the reaction of the state, as they know that this will play into the hands of their cause. It is clear that one of the reasons why with every suicide bomber killed in Israel there will be dozens to replace them is the way Palestinians have been treated by Israel. When your homes are destroyed and family members killed and maimed, you have little to lose anymore and this will propel you to take dramatic steps to avenge your losses.

In this regard, we need to be engaged with the population and win the propaganda war, which is equally important. Terrorism will not be able to flourish if they lack public sympathy and support, especially when the public itself could well end up as the victim. Terrorism is about instilling fear in people and by right this should have an opposite effect as the population would be angered by such acts. As the Chinese proverb goes, "kill ten frightened ten thousand". However, if the terrorists are able to justify their actions and win the propaganda war then the state will have to contend with a population that will provide support and even sanctuary for them.

Lastly, we need to address their grievances. Obviously, a lot depends on the nature of the group. If they are mere fanatics and have followers, it is critical to know why people follow such leaders blindly, despite being aware of the futility of the effort and even the cause. We need to address this. In the case of Malaysia, we have discovered that some religious schools have become the breeding ground for militant thinking. Young students have been indoctrinated and a culture of hatred emerges, even though Islam is a religion of peace and of tolerance.

At the end of the day, I am convinced that development will be the most effective manner by which the government can connect with the people and vice versa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the world is today focused on Iraq and the Palestinian question, as well as Afghanistan, there are other parts of the globe that confront violence, in which terror is often a part of. I believe we in Malaysia are fortunate as we are not too susceptible to conflict. This could be attributed to the moderate nature of Malaysians. This has also been the result of our prudent leadership, the collective leadership representing the racial groups of this country. The consensual politics that have existed even before independence has been the key to Malaysia's success. To a large extent because of this, Malaysians do not easily tolerate extreme views and although such groups and views do have their followings, they remain isolated.

Another point has to be the economic factor, whereby development and growth have been the hallmark of our

history. When the stakes are high for most, people are less inclined to destroy what they have. In other societies, destroying comes easily as they have little to lose.

History is there for all of us to know and to learn. Every country, every society and every community have their own history to tell. However, we cannot merely read history and leave at that. The Russian Catherine the Great once said, "What is past cannot be rewritten, but it is within our power to rewrite the future". Join me in learning and at the same time to appreciate our history. It is perhaps the only hope we have to help us through this rather bleak time when human life has become such a worthless commodity. Let us go back to the basics where human dignity and human life are precious and well worth to defend, especially when truth is on our side. Thank you very much.