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"ISLAM SEES ITSELF AS OPPRESSED"

Malaysia is the only country with a Muslim majority which has managed to steer itself away from destitution, and has experienced economic success (apart for royalties from petroleum resources).

And what a success ! After two decades of dazzling growth, its 24 million people have multiplied by 10 their per capita income which now equals half of ours. This miracle is attributed, even by its most intransigent detractors, to Mahathir Mohamad who has led the country for more than 20 years. It is him who has planned the development, applying protectionism but all the while striving to make Malaysia an export champion, building mosques and airports with the same vigour, favouring the Bumiputeras while not forgetting the Chinese and the Indians who are at the heart of the business community.

A friend of Jacques Chirac, this 75-year old Muslim has also stood out thanks to his provocative stands worthy of a de Gaulle or a Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990 : denouncing the international financial system, criticising American domination, affirming that the Asian values are superior than the individualistic and materialistic West. With, in addition, "skiddings" bordering on antisemitism.

Mahathir faces a democracy with complex connections. In Malaysia, the elections are free but the freedom of the public is restrained/limited. Islam is the official religion but the freedom of religion is total.

Confronted with a rising Islamist opposition, which obliges him to give some guarantees to his electorate but careful not to cut the bridges with the West which is economically and geopolitically vital for this modest country surrounded by giants with sharp teeth, Mahathir treads along a narrow ridge between two competing temptations of the Muslim world : one of confessional/religious confinement and the other of cultural alienation.

Q: You officially condemned the attacks of Sept 11 but, a short while later, you condemned with equal severity the

American attacks in Afghanistan. Are they, in your opinion, the same ?

Dr M : No, it's not actually comparable. But it's a fact that, just like the terrorist attacks had cost the lives of innocent people, in the same manner, the American attacks on Afghanistan are going to exact the lives of other innocent people. What's worse is that these attacks are not going to contribute towards the fight against terrorism. It's the opposite ! In fact, nobody knows where are the real/genuine terrorists. Therefore, it is not by attacking Afghanistan that we would be contributing towards eliminating terrorists who are hiding in Europe, in Arab countries or even in the United States. On the other hand, numerous Muslim countries are going to have the feeling that it is less a matter of chasing the terrorists than a revenge. It's for this reason that we do not support the attack against Afghanistan.

Q: In your opinion, what is the objective of Bin Laden ? Can we understand such a criminal act ?

Dr M : First of all, I don't take it as a fact/as settled that these terrorists were the messengers of Bin Laden. I don't dispute that he is the head of a group of terrorists. Some of them had even trained Malaysians hoping to see that they would go back to our country and topple my government. So I don't have any particular affection for Bin Laden. But there's nothing to guarantee that if we attack Bin Laden, it will bring an end to terrorist acts. Most importantly, we'll have to try to understand why intelligent, well-rounded and relatively well-off people who have families, can decide to slam a plane into a tower ! If we content ourselves with saying that they must be crazy people, we would not be able to treat/resolve the problem. As you know, I am a doctor by profession. A doctor starts by searching for the source of the illness and would not be happy to treat the pain with some aspirins. The big question is this : what was it that could have motivated these people ?

Q: And what is your answer ?

Dr M: I feel that it is linked to the situation in West Asia. The feeling of discontent regarding this matter is widespread/generally felt in the Muslim world. With one billion Muslims, surely there would be a handful of extremists who are willing to kill themselves with the hope that this will help to fight terrorism that they themselves have to endure. For in the eyes of Muslims, the attacks by Jews also constitute an act of terror, state terrorism.

Q: But the situation in West Asia, which is not something new, can it all by itself fuel that much resentment among Muslims ?

Dr M: Muslims have the impression that the entire world is oppressing them. In Bosnia, some 200,000 Muslims had to be massacred by the Serbs before the world began to react. In Kosovo, the Muslims once again were attacked by the Serbs. In Chechnya, a lot more died simply because they wanted to free themselves from the grip/iron rule of the Russians. I could add Kashmir, Sudan and of course, Iraq where 500,000 children died due to the lack of food and medicine caused by the sanctions. Muslims think that other people accuse them easily of terrorism whereas other terrorists are not distinguished by their ethnic or religious belonging/adherence. When talking about Palestine, nobody in the West speaks of "Jewish terrorism" like people do when it comes to "Muslim terrorism" ! And when Timothy McVeigh blew up a building in Oklahoma, the first American reaction was to say that it was "Muslim terrorism" ! Moreover, McVeigh surely had accomplices. How is it that they could not be found, that people did not even try to do it just like they are trying to destroy Muslim terrorists ?

Q: Isn't Malaysia exposed to Muslim terrorism too? Some people have even considered your country as one of its centres (with) one of the pilots of the Sept 11 attacks having been seen in contact with some extremist groups in your country ?

Dr M: We have seen the emergence of a group comprising Muslims who want to turn Malaysia into what they call an Islamic state. As they could not impose themselves through the ballot boxes, they tried to topple my government. They went to Pakistan, then Afghanistan where they were trained by Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban. We had identified, detained and put them in prison. We had even prevented an attack against American sailors in one of our ports. You see, we know how to do it...But of course, if a foreign terrorist whom we do not know come to our country as a "tourist", we are not sure/certain of being able to catch him. I would like to remind you that in the United States, the terrorists who were responsible for the Sept 11 attacks were not even suspects in the eyes of the local authorities! But to accuse us of hiding criminals solely based on the grounds that some terrorists had been in Malaysia, this does not make any sense. Nobody is accusing the Swiss government of colluding with the terrorists even though some of them who were involved on the Sept 11 attacks had also stayed in Switzerland.

Q: Apart from Malaysia, no other country with a Muslim majority had managed to pull out from the state of under-development. Is it a stroke of good luck ?

Dr M: In every Muslim community, you will find a minority of the people who would like to create an Islamic state and will try to stop the government from developing the country economically. Instead of encouraging Muslims to study, to acquire skills, they say to them : "You must only study religion, nothing else!". And this prevents Muslims from catching up with lost time. All Muslim countries are aware of the scourge of such extremism. A big chunk of our energy, that of the Muslims, is wasted on managing these internal tensions/problems. In Malaysia, it's true, we have been more successful than other Muslim countries. This demands a strong will, a steadfastness, a capacity to accept criticism, but also the support of the majority. I personally enjoy a very strong support of the Muslim majority who are moderates in my country. And this is why I could succeed. But a lot of governments in other Muslims countries, not getting popular support, are not able to achieve the same thing, and their countries remain very poor.

Q: So, isn't it unfair to criticise the West for the failure of the Muslim world ?

Dr M: You have seen that I do not shy away from criticising Muslims when I think that it is fair. But you cannot let them carry all the burden of their failure all by themselves ! The West had been very unfair with the Muslim world and the Third World in general, and this must be rectified.

Q: But beyond that, isn't there something in the Muslim faith that might be incompatible with the capitalist success, which is based on the individual desire to enrich himself ?

Dr M: It's only when this tendency is pushed to the limit that it will go against Islam. But if we follow strictly the teachings of Islam, we will experience the biggest success on the planet. The big Muslim empire of the past was founded on Islamic teachings. Today, certain extremists distort these teachings to serve their personal and political ambition. The Quran teaches us to live in peace with those from other religions, calls upon us not to seek quarrel with them if they do not seek quarrel with us. This is what we're doing in Malaysia where all sorts of religious communities live together harmoniously. An Islamic country doesn't have to be like Afghanistan ! An Islamic country works on achieving development and peace, it wants to maintain good relations between the communities. It is a country where a Muslim is free to fulfil all his religious obligations. It is the case

here and, furthermore, it is also the case for the non-Muslims. Extremism is condemned by Islam.

Q: The competition posed by China worries all the countries in this region. How could you deal with it if you maintain laws favouring the Malays (Bumiputeras) to the detriment of the other communities (reserved public jobs, discount on properties) which erodes the competitiveness of the country?

Dr M: It is necessary to maintain a balance in the levels of economic development between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia to ensure its stability. Giving up a part of our potential growth so as to maintain a peaceful domestic environment constitutes a necessary judgement. We went through, 30 years ago, racial clashes and we do not want to go through it again. However, despite this requirement, we experienced a period of annual growth of 8 per cent for 10 years ! The current slowing down is the result of a global sluggishness (of the economy). And our unemployment rate, less than 4 per cent, is lesser than yours.

Q: You have been advocating for an Asian currency to counterbalance the weight of the dollar. Why not choose the Euro ?

Dr M: We would have liked to choose the Euro ! But European companies often refuse to deal with anything else than the dollar ! How do you expect us to have more faith in your currency than you yourself ?