

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
(PRIME MINISTER)

EVENT: THE COUNCIL OF FOREIGN RELATIONS

VENUE: NEW YORK

DATE: 30 SEP 1993

TIME:

Leadership in the post-Cold War era:
The Challenge of Change
Mr. Leslie Gelb, President of the Council;
Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen,
I would like to thank the Council of Foreign Relations for inviting me to address this august body. It is with some trepidation that I put forward some of my thoughts on the importance of world leadership in the post-Cold War era.

2. Despite the end of the Cold War and perhaps because of it we are witnessing today the outbreak of serious conflicts in various parts of the world. Age-old ethnic and nationalistic antagonism, subdued by authoritarian rule, are resurfacing. Critical international economics and social development issues remain intractable, and developing countries continue to be marginalised. The world clearly still needs strong leadership of the kind that looks beyond national boundaries.

3. Yet when the G-7 met recently in Tokyo they were led by 'incredible' leaders, i.e. leaders who had no credible support at home.

4. Democracy is supposed to mean rule by the majority. These government leaders had support-ratings well below a democratic majority. And yet they represent the most powerful democratic nations of the world.

5. The world needs not just world leaders by virtue of being leaders of great countries but decisive leaders in world affairs. These leaders must be concerned not just with their own position but willing and able also to do what is right.

6. In the rubble of the collapsed 'evil empire' some of the most cruel wars are being fought. A whole ethnic group is being exterminated in full view of everyone, aided by a misguided arms embargo. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and more than two millions forced to flee their burnt towns and villages.

7. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Nagorno Karabakh, in Abkhazia and many other places, all these horrors are taking place.

8. A leaderless world merely stands by to watch without extending a helping hand.

9. In the field of trade, leaders merely submit to domestic pressures. Policies are made purely for narrow short-term political interest. That such policies are damaging in the long-run are ignored.

10. With the defeat of Communism and, for the small nations, the option to defect, international relations no longer consists of counter offers in order to win support. Choices are out. Pressures and threats are in.

11. And why are strong nations and world powers so seemingly unable to handle even simple problems? Why are they led by such weak leaders? At the hour of their greatest triumph why are the Western democracies so unwilling and incapable of handling even small military upstarts like Serbia or Armenia? Why are they not reaping the 'peace dividends' following upon the end of the Cold War? Why are they leaving the world so leaderless?

12. The answer may lie in the corruption of democracy. All these nations are weak in practically all fields because they practise a distorted form of democracy; a democracy that stresses form rather than substance. Democracy has become an article of faith wherein its worship is far more important than the practical results obtained from it.

13. It is dangerous to make a religion out of an ideology. For 70 years the Russians practised Communism as a religion. As such everything that was done in the name of Communism was accepted unquestioningly. Woe betide any non-believers in their midst.

14. As a result a country rich in resources populated by a highly cultured and advanced people was reduced to extreme poverty and backwardness.

15. It was obvious to outsiders that far from distributing wealth equally among the people, Communism was actually distributing poverty. The promised 'workers paradise' was not materialising. Instead the Communist countries were becoming hellish dictatorships which oppressed the workers in particular.

16. Still no one dared to question the ideology and the system that went with it. No one dared to be a heretic. Everyone had to be a faithful believer. Even when what was believed was obviously incorrect, wrong and false -- a believer had to believe, especially a believer in the midst of other believers.
To question is not only heretical; to question is to invite

painful retribution, imprisonment and even death.

17. And so Communism went on inflicting sufferings and damaging the economy of Russia for 70 years. It took a cunning man to work his way up to the summit of the system to break it.

18. It is clearly dangerous to make a religion of an ideology. Now we are doing that to democracy. Challenge democracy and you will be branded a heretic. Challenge even the esoteric interpretations of democracy and the fanatics will be after you, branding you as an unbeliever, a renegade.

19. As much as the Communists were intolerant, the democrats, particularly the liberal democrats, are intolerant. You risk excommunication if you question the wisdom of even the less fundamental of democratic practices. You will be branded and hounded by the democratic press and the fanatical democrats.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. I am a democrat and Malaysia is a democratic Country. Americans will most probably smile at this assertion. But we in Malaysia will continue to insist that we are democratic. Our view is that democracy is not a religion, that it is merely a political system, that it is not perfect. It is not a cure-all for social, political and economic maladies. Indeed, democratic fanaticism is more likely to create social, political and economic problems rather than cure them. The present malady assailing the western nations, the weakness in their leadership in particular, is due to democratic extremism.

21. When democracy was first defined, it meant merely a system of government by the people. But since then many new qualifications have been added, without which a popular Government would not be regarded as democratic. However, even if we take the basic simple majority, we will find that most democratic Governments fail the test.

22. A democratic government should really have more than 50 percent of the people supporting it. In the West, where voter turn-out seldom reach 50 percent, it is possible that a government, supported by 26 percent of the voters, to be, 'democratically elected'. Such governments are usually weak as desertion by one or two members would bring them down.

23. In a multiparty system, there may be no party able to get a majority. A post-election coalition results in a weak government in which the bigger party lives in fear of the smaller coalition partner. Effectively it is the small coalition party which rules. And that is far from democratic.

24. If the proportionate system is used the chances of any party getting half the votes cast are very remote. Again

weak coalitions have to be formed or a minority Government set up, hardly democratic and certainly weak.

25. Excepting where an election gives a very big majority to the party forming the government, the democratic system is more likely to return weak governments. Weak governments will throw up weak leaders, concerned more with placating the electorate than with doing the right things. Governments which will do only popular things, cannot govern.

26. The majority of the people are not always right. The majority of Serbs voted for the genocidal government of Slobodan Milosevic. And the majority can very often be oppressive of the minority. And so someone decided that a democracy must accord rights to the minority or the individual. This is a contradiction in terms especially when the exercise of minority or individual rights adversely curtails or negate the rights of the majority.

27. Today the facists are back. They are a minority. Left to them-selves their jingoism is likely to gain them increasing support. Remember how the Nazis came to power? Does a democracy uphold the democratic principle or does it deny democratic rights to a dangerous minority?

28. In any society the rich must be fewer than the poor people. Of course some rich people are crooks. But in a market economy the rich are likely to be the entrepreneurs, the people who create wealth and jobs. Without them a market economy cannot prosper.

29. But their numbers are fewer than the workers. A democratic government needs votes. Pandering to the entrepreneurs, even though they may be in the right, is not going to be helpful to politicians. It is more politically expedient to support the more numerous workers. And so wages and costs go up, and productivity and competitiveness go down. This is certainly not good for a country competing in the world market. It can eventually undermine the economy. But it is democratic.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

30. There are many more things wrong with the practice of democracy. The arrogance of power of the media before whom the most powerful politician cringes. The power of the trade unions, the power of the pressure groups, the lobbyists, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), the local party boss. Then there is the need to be transparent, the fear of the intentional leak. Even laws may be broken in the name of democracy.

31. When a leader is elected in a western democracy his main concern is to stay in power. He has little time for anything else. If under the law he cannot stand again, then he is regarded as a lame-duck President, who literally is lame.

32. Is it any wonder that there are no credible leaders from the western democracies?

33. The world is faced with many problems. We have political problems, economic problems, social problems and problems of international relations. We have a brutal war going on, massive starvation, the plague of AIDS and other diseases, poverty, terrorism, refugees and migrants, drugs, desertification, floods, disasters and more, many more.

34. To deal with all these we need strong governments and strong leaders working together. The U.N. cannot function unless strong leaders are able to lend their countries' support.

Ladies and gentlemen,

35. Everyone agrees that the world is undergoing rapid changes.

36. To merely accept changes and to adjust to them is almost primitive. We should be willing and brave enough to examine the changes and to intelligently engineer them. Only when we do this can we say that we are facing the challenge of change.

37. The mere switch from Communism and the command economy to Democracy and the free market is not enough. The problems have remained. Unless we have an open mind and are prepared to question all the things we have accepted, we may not be able to tackle the problems at the end of the Cold War.

38. Democracy and the free market is not a God-given system. It certainly is not a religion. It is only one of the devices to meet the problems of human society. We should not therefore be afraid to question all that we do in the name of democracy.

39. Majority rule, minority rights, freedom from oppression, freedom from hunger, freedom of association, freedom of the press and the right to free speech, transparency, the rule of law and a host of other ideas and thoughts linked directly or obliquely with democracy -- all these need to be examined.

40. Remember the Inquisition, the religious persecutions which drove the European settlers to this country. Just as the settlers believed that their interpretation of Christianity was right, the Inquisitors and the persecutors believed that in persecuting they were obeying the tenets of Christianity. Who was right? It cannot be both.

41. Is it not possible that there are today democratic inquisitors and persecutors? Is it not possible that the accepted interpretation of democracy is as wrong as those

about Christianity in the days of Christian extremism in Europe? Do we wait for centuries of sufferings before we revise our ideas about the true meaning of democracy? Think of the countries called Democratic Republic and Peoples Republic. The western democrats certainly do not accept the democratic credentials of these countries. Is it not possible that the credentials of the Western democracies are also questionable? How democratic were they when they owned huge empires?

42. The time has come for rethinking the unthinkable. That is the challenge that faces us today. Unless there are leaders from the powerful nations willing to face this challenge, the world will be led by 'incredible' leaders.