

**SPEECH BY TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
AT THE CONFERMENT OF DOCTORATE IN DIPLOMACY AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JORDAN  
ON THURSDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2011**

-----

**“Democracy and Development”**

1. We live in an age in which democracy is the flavour of the century. Many believe that democracy can guarantee development, that all one needs to do is to practice democracy.
2. This is because some of the best developed countries are democratic. On the other hand the totalitarian Communist countries seem to be uniformly under developed.
3. Democracy basically is about the right of citizens to participate in Government. But obviously direct participation by them would be impossible. The best that can be done is Government by their representatives.
4. But how should these representatives be chosen? Initially it was thought that people with a stake in the assets of the country should be the representatives. Thus the first representatives were the land owners. But obviously these representatives would look after their interest only. To cut a long story short, stage by stage, different classes agitated and were given the right to be representatives of the people as a whole.
5. Today we have what is regarded as universal suffrage i.e. every citizen has the right to vote to choose representatives.
6. Over the decades much experience on governing was gained by the early democracies. They learnt that there are constrains and disciplines which they must adhere to if democracy is to work. There are limits beyond which people must not go so as to get the best out of democracy. Understanding these, the early democracies worked well giving the impression that democracy is the best form of Government if a country wishes to develop.
7. However along the way new conditions and rights were added to democracy. Human rights, freedom of the press, the rule of law, political rights, liberal codes of morality and variations in the system and practice of democracy in Government. -- all these must be present before a democracy can be considered democratic. The original right to vote was not enough.

8. The mature democracies were able to handle all these innovations. But new democracies find great difficulty in accommodating these rights and freedoms.

9. Political rights may result in too many parties being formed. The people would be divided into small groups based on ethnicity or ideology. The fragmentation of the electorate may result in no party getting an absolute majority to form a Government.

10. A minority Government may be formed which can fall with a vote of non-confidence at anytime. It would therefore be too weak to rule effectively. Much of the time would be spent on politicking. Development would be put on the back-burners.

11. If one of the parties win a fairly substantial number of seats but not enough to form a Government, it may try to form a coalition Government with another minority party. This coalition would be unstable as the junior partner will demand that it be given important portfolios and its own agenda be accepted as that of the coalition Government. If it does not get what it wants it will leave the coalition and the Government would fall.

12. Again such a coalition would be weak. The development agenda will not receive the attention needed.

13. Some democracies adopt proportionate representation in the Government. The Government will almost certainly be a coalition of parties with different policies and plans and such a Government will just not work.

14. Then there is the two-party system. In this system one party would almost certainly get more seats than the other party. It will form a majority Government.

15. But if the majority is small the Government would be perpetually threatened by defection by its own members. The Government may fall if there is defection.

16. Malaysia is a democracy which is governed by a coalition Government. It is usually very strong. But that is because it is a pre-election coalition. The racially-based parties helped each other to win by supporting each other's candidates. The understanding is that coalition candidates would not only not be challenged by other component parties but they will get the vote of all the supporters of the component parties.

17. The Malaysian coalition has 14 parties. Should any party defect the coalition would still not lose its majority and would continue to rule the country.

18. Still when the leader of the coalition failed to provide good leadership, the supporters refused to give unquestioning support. In the 2008 election the coalition lost in five states and failed to get a good majority in the federal parliament.

19. The freedoms guaranteed by democracy tend to undermine the smooth running of the Government even when it is strong. Every policy or plan by the Government would be subjected to strong criticism if not outright opposition. Handling these condemnation by the opposition parties in and out of parliament and criticisms by the press and the NGOs require great skills and takes much of Government time.

20. Sometimes there would be street protests and even strikes. These will cause instability and business would be adversely affected. The whole country can be paralysed because of street violence and general strikes. Development cannot take place. The Government may have to resign.

21. In one country which has basically a two-party system, the moment a Government is elected there would be nation-wide demonstrations and strikes. After futile attempts to govern the nation and to develop, the Government would be forced to resign. A new election may put the opposition in power.

22. The defeated former Government party would then organise strikes and demonstrations to force the new Government to call for elections before its term is out.

23. This charade would go on and on as each party tries to unseat the current Government.

24. The country is obviously democratic but it is ungovernable. There would be no development.

25. This is not a fairy tale. It is happening to a few countries. They are praised for their democracy but their countries remain undeveloped.

26. But the beauty about the democratic system is that if the Government fails for any reason, a new Government can be put in place merely by voting in elections. A revolution or violent uprising against the Government would not be necessary. For this reason democracy is the preferred system.

27. A feudal or a dictatorial system may not always be bad. If the ruler cares about the country and the people, he can do wonders for them. China provides a good example.

28. The democratic Weimar Government of post World War 1 Germany was an absolute failure. The currency collapsed completely. Inflation was very high.

Poverty was rampant and the jobless depended on soup kitchens to remain alive. But it was democratic.

29. Then came Hitler. His dictatorial rule turned around the economy and restored national pride. Suddenly Germany became a great power again, with a huge military machine supported by a manufacturing industry. With the military build-up, the unemployment problem was wiped out.

30. The people embraced his racist policies and condoned his denial of such democratic rights as the free press and the formation of opposition parties.

31. Where democracy had failed, in terms of development, dictatorship had clearly succeeded. A defeated impoverished country became once again a great power. Development was initiated and Germany became a dictatorial show-piece.

32. But Hitler took Germany into another war. Germany lost and the Great Dictator committed suicide.

33. This is a typical story about dictatorships and absolute rulers. They can be very effective in development but invariably they would abuse their power. When criticised they would react violently. This would escalate. They would resort to killing people including innocent people.

34. Having done this they would be frightened for their lives. They could not lose power fearing punishment for their misdeeds. Wanting to stay in power to prevent retributions, they would use even more cruel ways to perpetuate their rule.

35. They may even succeed. But eventually there would be a breaking point. And the people will rise against the tyrants.

36. Clearly authoritarian rule is not an option. But the democratic system is also not a guarantee for development and the well being of the people. Still it is obvious that it has served many countries better than dictatorships.

37. In the final analysis, what is needed is maturity of the citizens themselves in the governance of countries. Democracy will work if the people understand the limitations of democracy. Democracy will also work well if the people are not too selfish, thinking only of their own personal interests, rather than national interests.

38. Now with your permission I would like to say something about Malaysia's experience with democracy and development.

39. Malaysia was a poor country with a per capita income of only 300 USD at the time of independence in 1957. It had never known democracy, being feudal

states before becoming British colonies. As colonies the power rested solely with the British.

40. Nevertheless upon independence it opted for a federation with 9 autonomous states and a federal Government based on parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarch.

41. The people are multiracial with 60% Malay Muslims and 40% Chinese Buddhist and Indian Hindus. The British had kept the races apart. But upon independence the races had to operate a multi-racial democratic Government.

42. I have already described the formation of a coalition of race-based parties to contest in elections. This coalition won and the first independent Government was made up of the three-race coalition.

43. Power was shared by the three races on the understanding that no race should expect to get 100% of what it believed it was entitled to. Each had to make a sacrifice so they could work together.

44. There was race riot in 1969 but the leaders of the three races managed to bring back law and order and address the feelings of deprivation among the Malay indigenous people who made up the poorest group in Malaysia.

45. The non-indigenous people were allowed to retain their languages and cultures and to set up schools where the medium of instruction was in their own languages. The national schools use Malay which is accepted by all as the national language of Malaysia.

46. Still the management of peoples of different races, cultures, religions, languages and economic development posed great difficulties. The opposition played on racial dissatisfactions and the Islamic religion to win support for themselves. Their appeal to racism and religion tended to destabilise the country.

47. Fortunately most Muslims believe in upholding justice as enjoined by Islam and the coalition of multi-racial and multi-religious parties continued to get their support.

48. The non-Muslim opposition also condemned as undemocratic the efforts to get the poorer indigenous Malays to achieve the same economic progress as the non-Malays. Their stress was on equality of opportunities and not on fairness.

49. Because there are three different schools catering to three different races, and because the national language is not used much by the non-Malays, there is poor unity in the country. There is always the threat of racial clashes.

50. There are many other problems faced by the multiracial population. But the coalition of moderates continued to win elections and to continue to form Governments.

51. There is therefore relative stability which enabled the Government to plan for development. Jobs were created through industrialisation. Aggressive marketing enabled international trade to grow.

52. There is close cooperation between the Government and the private sector under the concept of Malaysia Incorporated. A Look East policy enabled Malaysians to acquire the work ethics and the industrialisation strategies of the East such as Japan and Korea.

53. Manufacturing and engineering skills were acquired through encouragement for the setting up of a national car industry and the manufacture of components. Steel and aluminum fabrication were initiated by the petroleum, construction and ship-building industry.

54. Judicious budgeting enabled the Government to build modern infrastructure such as highways, ports, airports, hydro electric and thermal power plants, highly subsidised medicare, schools and universities, telecommunication systems, national shipping and airlines, water supply etc. These infrastructures contributed to making Malaysia attractive to investors in manufacturing industries, plantations, petroleum production and petro-chemical industries, food industries and tourism.

55. In everything the stress is on Malaysians doing things themselves. However, low-paying jobs in the construction and manufacturing industries are dependent on foreign workers of which there are two-and-a-half million in a population of 28 million.

56. Today Malaysia has all the attributes of a modern industrialised country which is quite well-developed. This has been made possible because of the Government's ability to maintain peace and stability and to plan and execute economic plans of five years and long-term plans of thirty years.

57. We could achieve this level of growth sooner if we are not democratic. But then if we get a bad dictator, who fails to develop the country, there would be no way to get rid of him other than by violence.

58. Despite the difficulties in operating a democracy and the slowing down of development because of inherent instability, Malaysia still managed to grow. It is far better if growth is slower due to democracy than fast growth under an authoritarian Government because when a leader goes wrong he cannot be removed to prevent damage to the country.

\*\*\*\*