

Egyptians, Under Attack, Look to Malaysian Example

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In times of crisis, like now, it is lawful that young people of university age become radicalized, and mobilized to seek social change. In Egypt, in addition to the political convulsions ripping through the region, there are serious problems related to the economic breakdown crisis, first among them unemployment, and especially among college graduates. Thus, it should come as no surprise that students at the University of Cairo should flock to a seminar featuring Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, the former prime minister of Malaysia, whose experience in defending his nation's economy against wild attacks by financial speculators in 1997, has made him famous.

Dr. Mahathir had been invited to the Cairo University, by the Center for Asian Studies and the Institute for Malaysian Studies, which set up a forum in 2003, dedicated to "The Thought of Mahathir Mohamad," whose purpose is to explain and promote the Malaysian model, especially for Arab and Islamic nations. As Prof. Mohammad Seyyed Selim, former director of the Center for Asian Studies, explained in his introductory remarks, the aim of the forum is to understand, not glorify, the Malaysian experience. The promoting institutes have thus far produced ten volumes of Dr. Mahathir's works in Arabic. The themes addressed by the forum this year, were the former prime minister's views on development, globalization, multi-ethnicity, and the Muslim community.

Dr. Mahathir was greeted with enormous enthusiasm by an overflow crowd of about a thousand students, who rose to give him extended applause. The reason for his extraordinary popularity has to do with his having resisted the International Monetary Fund at the time of the currency crisis, as well as his outspoken commitment to the Palestinian cause. In addition, as one journalist at a press conference following the seminar noted, Dr. Mahathir became famous during his last visit to Cairo, for a remark he made, when asked why he had resigned his post. "Twenty-two years are enough," was his reply. This had brought the house down, since, in most nations of the Arab world, longevity in office is a time-honored tradition.

In his remarks to the students, and faculty members, Dr. Mahathir dealt with Malaysia's domestic and foreign policy, stressing the primacy of expanded economic growth. Polemicizing against facile slogans about equal distribution of wealth, he made the point that this is meaningless, unless the economic pie is growing constantly; that way, each slice can be bigger, even to the point of becoming bigger than the original pie.

Referring to his nation's experience, he reported that Malaysia, which had high unemployment, now has full employment, and that those living in poverty represent only 5% of the population (1% are in the category of extreme poverty). The relationship between government and the citizenry he characterized as reciprocal: The government must help the people prosper, and the people must help the government do this. He said that, since governments require financial means, the population must become richer in order to provide tax revenues. Again polemicizing against populist slogans, such as "cutting taxes," he argued that taxation is required in order to finance vital social services, and that the key to adequate tax revenues is full employment. He also developed the notion that, if a nation is to ensure that each generation become more advanced, with a higher standard of living than the previous one, it must recognize the importance of expenditures for education, saying that Malaysia had allocated up to 25% of its budget for education, as compared to 6-8% for defense.

Another key point made in his speech, was that economic prosperity is the precondition for national independence and true sovereignty. A small country, Malaysia had to move from an agricultural economy to industrialization, and has succeeded to the point that it can maintain itself, pay its debts, and thus resist international pressures. When the Malaysian currency was attacked, he said, it was considered an attempt at neocolonialism, because it could have led to impoverishment, and the loss of national independence. The IMF could have forced loans and conditions on the country, paving the way for foreign takeovers, at bargain prices. This is the reason Malaysia had to resist the IMF, he said. He attacked globalization more generally, as a new form of colonialism, making the historical comparison: In the past, colonial powers came in warships and demanded monopolies; today, they spread globalization, in a "borderless" world. When they say "the market," they mean their banks.

If a country achieves economic growth, it can pursue an independent foreign policy, he asserted, adding that his country would support the United Nations as an institution, but would not participate in adventures launched under the cover of the UN, by single powers.

Although Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, the role of Islam is central, and Dr. Mahathir has been known for his proposal for a golden dinar, as a trading currency among an Islamic common market. One important, timely point made in this connection, was about the role of Islam. Expressing pride in the fact that Malaysia had proven

that any Islamic country can achieve such growth rates, he criticized the shift in Islamic history, away from a commitment to science, to a more limited religious approach. That commitment to science, and to all branches of knowledge more generally, had been the landmark of the Islamic renaissance, from the early period in Baghdad, across North Africa and into Islamic Spain, or Andalusia, through the 15th Century. Just at the point when European culture was launching its golden renaissance, Dr. Mahathir said, Islamic civilization was turning in a different direction. The notion that Islam “is sufficient,” that is, that religious teaching alone suffices for social progress, was an error, he said. This led to a degeneration of the civilization, at a time when Europe, in large part reaping the achievements of Islamic culture, was generating immense progress. Thus, there is an urgent need to return to this heritage of science and technology.