

LEARNING FROM THE LESSONS OF HISTORY*

Mahathir bin Mohamad

1. I would like to thank the International Association of Historians of Asia and the University Malaysia Sabah for inviting me to declare open this conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia here today.
2. History is a great teacher which can help us create a better world. But unfortunately the lessons of history are often ignored, sometimes deliberately. And because we ignore the lessons of history we keep on repeating the mistakes of the past and we suffer accordingly. This is what George Santayana meant when he said that if we ignore the lessons of history then we would be condemned to repeat our mistakes. The world of today gives the feeling of “déjà vu”, of having seen all these things before. Nothing new is really happening because we continue to commit the same mistakes, the same crimes and the same sins.
3. The history that we study is frequently about wars fought between nations almost continuously. At one time a war raged in Europe for a hundred years. Between the nations of Europe hardly a year passed in the first two millennia when there was not a war between one of them and another. Borders changed and changed again and again as nations fought in order to gain territory, unable to learn that such conquests were not permanent.
4. In the last century two horrendous wars were started in Europe which eventually engulfed the whole world. Tens of millions were killed and maimed, whole cities and towns were destroyed and even the richest states were impoverished.
5. Finally when the second of these world wars ended, the big powers finally realised that in a war there are no winners or losers. Everyone lost.

* Speech by the prime minister of Malaysia, the Hon. Dato Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad at the opening ceremony of the 16th conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia at the Magellan Sutera Hotel, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah on Thursday, 27 July 2000 at 9.00 am.

War is destructive and nothing could be gained by settling disputes between nations through warring. The world heaved a sigh of relief as a new instrument was set up to put an end to warring and to settle disputes through civilised negotiations around a table.

6. The United Nations Organisation was set up in order to enable disputes to be settled without resorting to war. But almost from the start the United Nations Organisation created new causes for international disputes. Instead of being truly a democratic organisation where all nations would enjoy equal rights, it became an organisation of the principal victors whose agenda was to dominate the world. Distrusting each other the five victors in the Second World War gave themselves veto powers so that the stand taken by anyone of them would determine the views and actions of the whole United Nations. In other words one nation can override the wish of the whole world. Worst still that veto can be used to veto any attempt to modify or do away with the veto.

7. This is a total negation of the principles of democracy. Perhaps it is understandable as two of the members were totally undemocratic and would not want the majority opinion to prevail. But even those who profess to be liberal democrats believed in exercising the power of the veto in direct contradiction to their professed championing of the sanctity of majority rule and opinion.

8. Although the five permanent members of the Security Council were the same five which formed the Alliance against the German Italian Axis, they turned against each other almost immediately after the United Nations was formed. They divided the world into two spheres of influence, the Western capitalist camp and the Eastern Communist camp. A Cold War was started between them which put the whole world under threat of nuclear war. Both sides built nuclear arsenals which were capable of destroying the whole world and humankind.

9. There were however some dividends for weak nations from this East West Cold War Confrontation. Keen to gain support for their blocs, each tried to subvert the colonial territories of the other. The Western bloc so feared the alienation of the peoples in their vast worldwide empire that they outwardly rejected colonialism and imperialism and set their colonies free. And so numerous new independent countries rose from the ashes of the Western empire and took their places in the United Nations. They naïvely believed that they were truly independent and their voices would be heard in the affairs of the world.

10. While the Cold War lasted the newly independent countries found themselves being wooed by both East and West. This gave them an importance which they did not really have. Many were able to play the two blocs against each other. They could get very substantial aid from one bloc simply by threatening to defect to the other bloc. They were supplied with

arms freely and helped in suppressing opposition in their countries which they labelled as supporters of the other bloc bent on setting up hostile Governments against their current benefactors. Some weak nations were thus able to change sides to their benefit.

11. The result was a world divided. Full-scale world wars were avoided although on several occasions the two blocs came to the brink of a nuclear war. On the other hand, proxy wars were waged in the client countries as every now and then the opposition group in a country grew big enough to launch a violent attack against the contemporary Government. Such wars were financed and supplied by the confronting ideological blocs of Europeans. Sales of arms to the poor emerging countries became a huge and very profitable business. And frequently new arms were live-tested in these countries during proxy wars leaving in their wake huge damage to the people and the countries involved.

12. Then abruptly the Cold War ended. The Communist bloc surrendered and decided to adopt Capitalist ideology and even to join the Western bloc. But the Communist soon learnt that they were not welcomed even though they had sincerely become new converts to the Western liberal democracy and the Capitalism of its free market. What the West wanted was not a partner to share in the wealth of this Earth. The West wanted total surrender and acceptance of the superiority of the West, in particular the most powerful member of the Western bloc.

13. Russia and the Communist countries must be made beggars and must no longer be allowed to become a world power. This was not difficult, as the Russians could not handle the free market economy or liberal democracy. Repeated attacks on the Russian Rouble soon destroyed the economy of the country. The Russian empire was broken up and Russian military might rendered quite insignificant compared to the Western Alliance. There is going to be no comeback for Russia. The weak countries of the world will no longer see the option to defect from one bloc to another. Henceforth these countries must submit to the will of the only bloc that is left—the Western bloc.

14. Freed from the need to woo and win the little countries, the Western capitalists showed themselves in their true colours. Before they had to tolerate a world order where little countries remained independent and free to govern themselves and their economy in their own way. Now there was no more need to tolerate the whims and fancies of these countries. The greedy capitalists did not see why they should allow such things as the independence of nations to frustrate their acquisitiveness.

15. For these capitalists the ideal world is one in which they are free to exploit countries, peoples and resources to satisfy their insatiable greed. And so they preached the freedom of capital to go anywhere ostensibly to bring wealth to poor nations, but in reality to create such economic and

financial dependence that political independence became irrelevant. Foreign capital became the opium of the poor countries. And so we see the return of imperialism in a different form.

16. The history of the world is a story of conquest and subjugation of the weak by the strong. We are seeing it again today. Conquest and domination or hegemony will be tolerated for a while. The weak will submit to the strong for as long as their spirit is broken. But sooner or later they will revolt. And then there will be bloodshed again. There will be fear among the oppressors as the oppressed fight back.

17. The weak will not be able to rise en masse. But they will do so in ways which will be no less destructive. Already we see acts of terror against those among the oppressors who are vulnerable. It does not matter that these targets are innocent. Unable to hit at the really guilty, they will hit at targets indiscriminately. Bombs will explode where they are least expected. Embassies and public buildings would be blown up. People will be kidnapped, ransomed or killed.

18. There will be retaliation and more innocent people will have to pay the price. No one would be safe. The world will not be peaceful as embittered people seek to free themselves from oppression through the only means at their disposal, terror.

19. I have related a piece of history. As you all know history is written to justify and glorify the nations of the historians. The picture that we get is biased and distorted. And one cannot learn much from the distortion of the truth, from lies. And here again we fail to learn from our past.

20. Coming nearer home I remember that the British colonialist powers insisted that Malaya was a country without a history. Many of us in school accepted this as we learnt about British and European history. We learnt about the War of the Roses, the Hundred Years War, the battles of Agincourt, of Waterloo and many others. We learnt about the Crimean War and Gallipoli. The inglorious defeat of the British by the Turks was made out as a kind of victory for the British forces. There was the Charge of the Light Brigade, another glorious episode for the British. And we acknowledged the invincibility of this great nation which colonised us.

21. But as Malaya had no history we learnt little about it. We knew little about how the Malay states came to be British Protectorates, a nice name for de facto colonies. And we would have remained British colonies had the Japanese not conquered us and revealed that the invincible was not invincible at all. Still the peoples of the Malay States and of British North Borneo and Sarawak welcomed back the British. But our erstwhile protectors flushed with victory decided to be less devious. They no longer needed to call the Malay States their Protectorates. They were the victors and they wanted to make it clear that the protectorates were what they really were - the colonies of the Greatest Empire on which the sun never

sets.

22. There was no pretence about British North Borneo being a colony. The pesky Raja of Sarawak was asked to give up his ridiculous, ante-diluvian title of White Raja and Sarawak was declared a British colony pure and supple.

23. As for the Malay States and the Straits Settlements, they were to be forced together to become a colony called the Malayan Union. Anybody at all could become a Malayan citizen. Dual citizenship was permitted and of course dual loyalties. The Malay Sultans would be made heads of the Muslim religion and Malay culture.

24. It was assumed that since Malaya had no history, the Malayan Union changed nothing. There should be ready acceptance by one and all.

25. But the peoples of Malaya remembered enough of their past to see that what was proposed was a radical change. The Malays and other indigenous people felt that they would lose the only land they had forever. And so they revolted.

26. The story of the struggle to regain their own land, the stories of Dato' Onn, Dato' Panglima Bukit Gantang, Dato' Nik Kamil, are strangely, not well told to the Malaysian students of today. It is as if the Government of Independent Malaysia also wished to propagate the view that Malaysia is a country without history.

27. Most countries glorify their struggles in order to imbue a sense of patriotism among their people. But in Malaysia we feel rather shy about glorifying our past, even recognising the real sacrifices and the contribution of our founders.

28. A historical achievement of Malaysia, albeit a relatively recent one, is the handling of race relations in order to prevent racist sentiments from developing and disturbing the peace and harmony in this multi-racial country. After the 1969 race riots the National Front Government took pains to remove the roots of such antagonism and jealousy between the races. Through political and economic action the differences and the disparities between the races were reduced. As a result Malaysia is one multi-racial country which is free from the kind of racial and religious frictions and confrontations which characterise other multi-racial or multi-religious countries.

29. But not everyone is happy with this peace and harmony, with these good race relations. The Government is accused of being unIslamic by a certain political party in order to cause Muslims to hate the Government and its dedication to tolerance and fairness to all races and religions. Contrary to the teachings of Islam they propagate religious extremism. And

this extremism and intolerance has led to an attempt to overthrow the Government by force. It has led to the unfortunate torture and killing of Malaysian peace-keepers of non-Muslim faith.

30. The Government, the National Front Government, has dealt with the extremists but hatred is still being sowed by those bent on winning support for their parties at all costs.

31. That Malaysia remains peaceful and harmonious despite the attempts to destabilise the country by irresponsible politicians and their extremist cohorts, is directly attributable to the principles, policies and philosophy of the National Front Government.

32. This is a part of the Malaysian story. It is a part of our recent history. It is something that the peoples of Malaysia should know and should learn about. But the fear that such a story might favour the current National Front Government and Party has resulted in these achievements not being played up as part of Malaysia's historical heritage. A good thing is feared because it may continue to do good.

33. And so another lesson of history may be lost, a lesson that can teach not only Malaysians but others as well about the conduct of Government, the behaviour of politicians, and the discipline required in a democracy in order to prevent a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural country from going up in flames and destroying itself.

34. Instead we are seeing today an attempt by foreigners, through their controlled media to abet inter-racial and inter-religious violence in Malaysia as they do for other countries. They advocate democracy as an end in itself. If the democracy leads to violence and destruction of an otherwise stable and prosperous society, it does not matter. The most important thing is that it is all in the name of democracy.

35. Again we have not learnt from the lessons of history. There was a time when the world espoused absolute feudalism to bring law and order to society. But the kings and priests abused feudalism, oppressing and raping the countries they ruled. Finally feudalism was discredited, discarded and replaced with republicanism. But the strong men and dictators thrown up by republicanism were no better than the kings and priests. They abused their authority and oppressed the people. Then came the idea of democracy, of Communism and Socialism, of Government by the common people. The exploitative capitalists and landlords were eliminated so that the workers would own and rule the country and take all the wealth for themselves. But still fairness and justice failed to make their appearance. A dictatorship of the proletariat oppressed the very people they were supposed to represent and in the process destroyed the wealth of the nation as well.

36. This is the history of humankind's attempt to shape a system of

Government and society in order to cure social ills and ensure equitability and justice for all. Almost invariably the systems and the ideologies all led to abuse and extremism. Once accepted the true purpose and objectives are quickly forgotten. Fanatical belief in the system and ideology lead to crimes being committed in their names. Yet the system or ideology is upheld for its own sake.

37. We are seeing the same thing happening with democracy. It is not the good result which democracy is supposed to bring about that is important. It is democracy and everything done in the name of democracy that is important. And so we see countries becoming anarchic and unable to develop because democracy in many instances undermines the ability of the Government to maintain law and order and to develop the country. Nationwide strikes, often accompanied with violence, demonstrations and riots, are said to be a part of the democratic processes as are individual disruptions of the life of the majority. Because all these are done in the name of democracy they have to be accepted, even though the country becomes unstable, anarchic and unable to develop and grow.

38. Again we have not learnt anything from the history of various forms and concepts of Government. Feudalism, Republicanism, Socialism, Communism, dictatorships, etc. all have been espoused, declared to be the solution to the problems of governing human society, and venerated as religions. Millions died defending all these systems. Millions more submitted religiously to them. But in the end they were all found to be faulty and oppressive and had to be discarded. Yet today we have accepted democracy as the sole system of governance; we are fanatical about it, we suffer all kinds of hardships caused by it and even die for it. Is it not likely that as with the other systems, democracy too will one day be recognised for the hardships and anarchy that it has caused; that it would be discredited and would eventually be rejected? If we say this will never happen, then we have learnt nothing from history. If democracy becomes extreme and oppressive because of the abuses in the name of democracy, then we have learnt nothing from our past either, for we have become so enamoured with democracy that we are unwilling to recognise and stop the abuses which are destroying the original ideals which had made us espouse the system.

39. History is not just for school children to learn in order for their memory of dates and events to be tested. History is for adults, particularly those adults who are entrusted with determining the policies of nations. If only they could continuously study history and seek the lessons that history provides, then they would be less prone to repeat the mistakes of the past. Then the world and the community of nations would be better governed and we would be blessed with a better world.

40. As historians you have a duty to make history an important subject for lifelong study by everyone. You have to be true to yourself and to the facts

of history. You, more than anyone else, must point out and explain the lessons of history. I do hope that your meeting here will contribute to a new perspective of our past. I hope you have a fruitful meeting.

41. On this note, I have great pleasure in declaring open this 16th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia.

Pejabat Perdana Menteri,
PUTRAJAYA