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Taking stock of Brand Malaysia

WIDE ANGLE

By **HUZIR SULAIMAN**

At the end of four months in the United States as a Yale World Fellow, our columnist reflects on how Malaysia is perceived by policymakers around the world.

EVERY year, the Yale World Fellows Program brings together 18 mid-career men and women from around the globe for a semester of enrichment, leadership training, and intensive discussions of global policy issues moderated by the university's leading professors. As one of the Fellows, I was privy to intriguing conversations and encounters with dozens of distinguished figures in public service and civil society.

These included the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation, Pascal Lamy; George Soros' former partner, the billionaire Jim Rogers; the United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, the Malaysian K.S. Jomo; the President of the Rockefeller Foundation; senior US State Department officials; columnists from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*; and the World Bank's senior economist.

We also met US army officers teaching at West Point; members of the Council on Foreign Relations; a delegation of prominent Indian parliamentarians; technocrats of the old Clinton Administration; foreign policy advisers to Republican candidates for President; numerous diplomats, both active and retired; and – most chillingly for this particular liberal – a Marine Corps colonel whose current assignment is to assess the viability of a preemptive strike on Iran.

One of my goals in these meetings was to advocate greater engagement with the governments, societies and cultures of South-East Asia in general and Malaysia in particular. I was also interested in finding out how our country is perceived in the wider world. What does Brand Malaysia mean to people working at the highest levels of policy making and implementation?

While many of our conversations were off the record, I am able to report some general findings, many of which frankly surprised me.

Malaysia's trade negotiators are respected. A senior South American negotiator told me that Malaysia's International Trade and Industry Minister is seen as highly effective. "She's tough – she comes in and tells you exactly what she wants, and then she proceeds to get it. She's got such a force of personality, it's really quite refreshing to negotiate with her. There's no nonsense. She just sits there and waves away your objections with her jewelled fingers."

The senior civil servants in her delegation also score high marks: “They’re very smart, very prepared, but also very nice people. Malaysia gets what it wants in international negotiations because people really like Malaysians – they’re very warm and open.” I heard this last point from several people working in quite dissimilar fields.

Malaysian multinational corporations have a reputation for being bad corporate citizens. This may or may not be fair, but there does exist a perception that Malaysian corporations, particularly those with operations in other developing countries, have little regard for the environment and little respect for the rights of workers.

In discussions of globalisation and its discontents, Western conglomerates come in for a lot of criticism for their rapacious behaviour. But Asian companies come under fire too – and Malaysian firms, rightly or wrongly, attract their share of flak.

Malaysia is perceived as a model multi-racial society. In all honesty, I found this very surprising. On several occasions, however, I was asked the secret of Malaysia’s success in creating a harmonious multi-racial society. It was difficult to know what to reply, at first, given that I am convinced our society is deeply dysfunctional, but I eventually realised that most of the people posing the question came from the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, and sub-Saharan Africa, and their definition of “harmonious” meant only “not actively engaged in genocide”. It’s all a question of one’s terms of reference.

Malaysia under Dr Mahathir was respected as a champion of developing nations. Our former Prime Minister appears to have been particularly appreciated for his sharp criticism of the developed West, and for his bravery in introducing currency controls during the Asian Financial Crisis in the face of scorn from Western economists.

Again, as a liberal who found much that was objectionable in his domestic policies, this was not necessarily what I wanted to hear, but I have to give credit where it’s due. As one senior Arab diplomat said to me, “I don’t understand why your people didn’t like him. In the rest of the world he was revered.”

Our current Prime Minister, however, does not seem to have made an impression yet, one way or the other, on the people I spoke to. This may not be a bad thing.

To the United States, South-East Asia is a low priority, and that includes Malaysia. This came up again and again in the course of my meetings, and this is the hard fact that we have to face: even for Americans who work in the field of foreign policy, Asean nations are barely on the radar. Brand Malaysia has little brand equity in the States, it appears.

This isn’t our fault. Historically, when the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War came to an inglorious end, it prompted a sort of psychic retreat from the whole region. Even in academia the vacuum is felt: South-East Asian Studies departments in American universities are thin on the ground, and their offerings are slim.

We are also a victim of our own relative prosperity and relative stability. Compared to Africa, our economies are robust and our populations healthy; compared to the Middle East, we are not a breeding ground for groups that target American interests and allies.

It was explained to me that American Presidents all assume office thinking they will be able to engage with the world in rational, strategic ways. The reality is that from their first day, their job is essentially reactive, and that what commentators call their foreign policy is merely the sum total of their responses to the daily crises that land on their desks. We don't feature in America's foreign policy simply because we can neither help them nor hurt them.

Again, this may not be a bad thing. We don't receive development aid that comes with strings attached. Nobody is invading us so as to bring us "freedom and democracy." In short, the world leaves Malaysia alone to sort out its own problems.

But we need to face up to those problems, create a more just society, and truly earn our good reputation.

We need to make sure that Brand Malaysia is built on real substance and isn't a brand like Enron: superficially attractive, but ultimately hollow, a disaster waiting to happen.

• *Huzir Sulaiman writes for theatre, film, television, and newspapers. For more information about the Yale World Fellows Program, go to www.yale.edu/worldfellows.*