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When the ends justify the means

Many NGOs receive funds from foreign countries but not all are equally transparent about it.

AEROPLANE passengers who enjoy the interactive maps on flights to KLIA will notice a curious settlement east of Sepang: Kampung LBJ in Negri Sembilan.

It was named after the President of the United States Lyndon Baines Johnson when he visited in 1966 (it remains the only town in Malaysia apart from Kuala Lumpur that has ever hosted a US President, and you can find footage of this visit by going to criticalpast.com and searching for "Lyndon Johnson Malaysia").

Although the Malayan Emergency was officially over, the Cold War was still very much ongoing elsewhere in the world.

Diplomatic showcases such as this reminded the world that newly-established Malaysia under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra was resolutely pro-democratic and unashamedly anti-Communist.

Of course, we would not have triumphed over the Communists if not for the enormous contributions – military and aid – that we received from our British and other Commonwealth allies.

And as our national focus moved from ensuring stability to development, our Government continued to receive funding from friendly countries and entered numerous bilateral partnerships to upgrade our infrastructure; this in addition to increasingly stable foreign direct investment of course.

Let us be clear: foreign funds were something the Malaysian Government actively sought, obtained, and celebrated, and there is no doubt that these funds formed a vital ingredient in our post-independence success.

Today, through our memberships of multiple international organisations, foreign funds continue to enter our country.

Still, some people's attitude towards foreign funding in Malaysia has been less enthusiastic, particularly where the recipients are non-governmental organisations they do not like.

The fact is that NGOs in democracies all over the world routinely accept and disburse funds to further the causes that they support.

In Malaysia, there are charities that have been accepting overseas donations for some time (like the Malaysian AIDS Council), and service organisations like Rotary International and the Lions Club which are headquartered in the USA have operated here openly for decades.

However, many recent entrants into Malaysian civil society have been far more vocal on policy and political matters than their predecessors. Since there is still scepticism and ignorance about the role played by think tanks and independent research institutes in a healthy democracy, the accusation that they are "foreign agents" is an easy one for critics to make.

There are many reasons why such accusations should be dismissed, prime amongst them that so many values are universal, shared by people across the world who will no doubt reach out to friends in other countries, just as Malaya did in fighting communism.

Indeed, our Federal Constitution adapted much from the British experience of parlia-



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mentary democracy, though of course modified to suit our own historical circumstances.

All of the major religions practised by Malaysians originated in "foreign" lands, and let us remember that virtually the entire social, political and economic structure of Negri Sembilan was, to begin with, "foreign": the Minangkabau immigrants who came from Sumatra brought with them their *adat*, institutions and wealth to a peninsula where *Adat Temengong* had hitherto enjoyed a monopoly, and yet these settlers continued to receive resources (and invited monarchs) from the motherland until the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824.

Let us be clear: foreign funds were something the Malaysian Government actively sought, obtained, and celebrated, and there is no doubt that these funds formed a vital ingredient in our post-independence success.

Today, many NGOs undeniably receive funds from foreign countries, but not all are equally transparent about it.

I'm proud to say that we at IDEAS have been open and honest about our funding from the beginning. Since our inception we have received funds or collaborated with organisations from Britain, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Turkey, Morocco, China, France, Germany, the United States and Nigeria.

Furthermore, we ourselves have funded activities for students in Indonesia.

Nonetheless, we have also worked with the Prime Minister's Department, government ministries, parliamentary and statutory bodies and political parties that did not feel that our relationships with foreigners compromised our patriotism and adherence to the vision of *Bapa Kemerdekaan*.

It is entirely fair for the *rakyat* to judge NGOs based on the activities that they run, the company they keep and the funding that they receive.

But the prerequisite for all of this is transparency and a free media, and that is where I believe the focus should be, rather than singling out any particular NGO, which is probably just as patriotic and committed to our national institutions (though not necessarily their office bearers) as most other participants in Malaysian civil society, even if some of their principles and methods may differ from ours.

> Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz is president of IDEAS.