

Change will take time

By Elina Noor

UNITED NATIONS REFORMS: *We have to be as effective as possible within the confines of the current reality*

WITH just five ballots short of the total 192, Malaysia will once again and for the fourth time take its seat as a non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for a two-year term beginning Jan 1, 2015.

There was, of course, no real question that we would not secure the seat, given that we were the only candidate from the Asia-Pacific group. It was, therefore, more a matter of how many votes we would be able to draw as an indicative level of support and confidence from among other UN member states.

Malaysia's election to the UNSC means at least three things for the country.

FIRST, it is testament to the commitment, labour, and capabilities of the Malaysian diplomatic machinery that endured and executed the entire campaign not just in the immediate run-up to the vote but also in the planning years preceding it.

SECOND, it is an endorsement of Malaysia's contribution to peace and security at the regional and global levels as well as the international community's continuing belief in us in that regard. No amount of horse-trading in the back rooms of the UN can take away from our track record of 30 peacekeeping missions and counting involving 29,000 personnel in locations as diverse as Lebanon, Somalia, Western Sahara, South Sudan, and Bosnia. Or of our medical mission in Afghanistan. Or of our role in facilitating the Bangsamoro framework agreement in Mindanao.

THIRD, it will mean a certain elevation of the country's image — and yes, prestige — at the international level. As a relatively small country unfolding just several decades now into nationhood with all its challenges, Malaysia has long punched above its weight in the rings of regional and international affairs. We sent our first peacekeeping contingent to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960 when Malaya was just three years old and Malaysia had not yet even come into being. We demonstrated a fierce — some would say stubborn — independence by resisting external prescriptions during the tumult of the Asian financial crisis. We cooperated extensively in intelligence and law enforcement exchanges even before the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001. And we continue to speak out against the gross violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territories.

There is, however, the risk of overplaying our UNSC membership and inflating our impact. The UNSC is dominated by the powerful five permanent member states wielding the veto and thus, the disproportionate ability to dilute, frustrate, or kill any meaningful resolution that does not serve their own interests. This is neither reflective of the UN's multilateral vision and promise nor is it fair. But realpolitik dictates that wholesale change is unlikely to come anytime soon. While we must continue pushing the UN reform agenda, in the meantime, we will simply have to be as effective as possible within the confines of this current reality.

Our celebrations, therefore, will come in small measures — tabling responsive resolutions, negotiating meaningful text, and registering our vote in a principled manner even if ultimately, this comes to naught in the face of a veto or a majority vote to the contrary.

For Malaysia to maintain the respect it has earned on the world stage, it must continue to appear, and be, substantially credible in the agenda that it drives. This means that if moderation is tabled as an

agenda item in order to counter the extremist threat of groups such as the self-professed Islamic State, then not only must Malaysia be able to translate rhetoric into action but prove that it can be



US President Barack Obama voting with other members while chairing a meeting of the UN Security Council in New York on Sep 24. Malaysia's election to the UNSC will elevate the country's image and prestige. Reuters pic.

done. For this concept to gain credence at the international level, there must be state and citizen buy-in at the domestic level because what is moderation as a foreign policy idea but an extension of its practice at home? With the resurgence of an increasingly ruthless brand of extremism and terrorism, it becomes even more urgent for moderation to take root at the domestic level in order to dissuade citizens from misadventures abroad or, indeed, at home.

Malaysia's UNSC responsibilities next year will coincide with our chairmanship of Asean. With Asean coming into its own as a community and seeking to do more "in a global community of nations" post-Bali Concord III, Malaysia will be prominent on two major, complementary fronts. We will, therefore, have to continue the good work already being done but importantly, be bold, willing, and innovative in implementing that which we aspire to.

Elina Noor is ISIS Malaysia Assistant Director, Foreign Policy and Security Studies