

# Mahathir-Suharto talks will enhance bilateral relations

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WHILE regular meetings at diplomat level are not unimportant in the relations between Malaysia and Indonesia, it is the occasional heart-to-heart contact at summit level like the one taking place this weekend between Indonesian President Suharto and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that provides the fillip.

Minus the unnecessary protocol and diplomatic niceties and away from the television cameras, the two leaders can certainly achieve more. This has been proven time and again in the long history of generally cordial relations between the two countries.

Malaysia-Indonesia relations broke new ground in the years following the end of *konfrontasi* in 1965. Pioneered by veteran diplomats like the late Tun Adam Malik of Indonesia and former Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, leaders of the two countries were constantly in touch with each other.

The relations achieved the highest level of cordiality towards the mid-1970s when both countries became comfortable with each other.

Malaysian and Indonesian diplomats and politicians said the scope of relations were broadened during the period of late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein who had a close personal relationship with President Suharto.

Although Malaysia adopted an unobtrusive approach to foreign policy during late Tun Hussein Onn's period, the relations with Indonesia remained cordial.

But insiders said some of the programmes agreed



DR MAHATHIR  
... added significance

upon between Tun Razak and President Suharto were not carried through although the relationship was never downgraded.

The 1980s saw the two countries preoccupied with managing political and economic changes brought about by the rapid transformation of East Asian economies and the collapse of communism in Europe.

Some observers have mistakenly interpreted Malaysia's active foreign policy under Dr Mahathir as an attempt to upstage its Asean neighbours, especially Indonesia.

This is true only in as far as Malaysia's willingness to adopt an open stand on many regional and international issues that at times appeared to run counter to Indonesia's more subtle stance.

Malaysia's growing independence in foreign policy matters was prompted in no small way by its strong economic achievement following the brief recession in the mid-1980s.

Indonesia, on the other hand, remained "proper and conservative" in its foreign

policy, reflecting in no small way the consensus-seeking nature of the country's politics.

Like in Malaysia, the apparent coolness on the part of Indonesia also has a lot to do with its own preoccupation with economic development. It, too, has made great strides in economic and social development.

The feeling in Malaysia is that, for a while, a large segment of Indonesian political and intellectual leadership was inclined towards strengthening the country's relations with other Asian neighbours.

However, things seem to be changing in the last year or so since Jakarta hosted the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) meeting and the unprecedented reshuffle of the Indonesian Cabinet three months ago.

The chairmanship of NAM steered Indonesia closer, if not altogether similar, to the point of view that Malaysia has always held in international relations, especially with the West.

The new Indonesian Cabinet, which is more broad-based and comprises younger leaders, seems to favour a re-orientation in the republic's regional and international outlook.

Both countries also recognise the growing importance of collaboration in order for them to continue to maintain their comparative advantages in international markets.

Against this background, the meeting between President Suharto and Dr Mahathir is seen as crucial to future relations between the two countries.

The basis for greater cooperation between Malaysia and Indonesia is never lacking. To begin with, historically, the two countries are bound together by common

cultural heritage.

There is little problem at the people-to-people relationship. There has been free movement of people between the two neighbours. Indonesia has always been a source of labour supply for Malaysia since the colonial days.

As neighbours, there are, of course, differences. But having lived through *konfrontasi*, there is little reason to doubt the ability of the two countries to overcome their problems and differences.

Problems such as illegal Indonesian immigrants in Malaysia and the overlapping claims over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands will not and should not be a hindrance to cordial and productive relations.

On the contrary, the two leaders should put their seal of approval for such forward-looking programmes as the new growth triangle involving Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the collaboration in investments and making the Straits of Malacca safer for shipping.

The meeting has an added significance because President Suharto had just returned from meeting leaders of the Group of Seven in Tokyo. He is expected to share his perspective of that meeting with Dr Mahathir.

The coming together of the two leaders also suggests that a firmer foundation is being laid in matters affecting bilateral relations. The region will no doubt pay close attention to this weekend's meeting.

President Suharto will be bringing with him five Ministers while Dr Mahathir will be assisted by four. The Indonesian delegation, including the Press, will number nearly 90.

We say *Dirgahayu* to the visitors.