

12 MAR 1997

Singapore - Kuan Yew (News Analysis)
JUST WHAT IS LEE KUAN YEW UP TO?

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, March 12 (Bernama) -- Lee Kuan Yew stirred up the hornet's nest in June last year when he hinted about Singapore's remerger with Malaysia if certain conditions were right for it to do so.

The conditions he set included Malaysia adopting the same policy of "meritocracy" which Singapore claims to follow without any race being in a privileged position and if Malaysia pursues as successfully the same goals as Singapore to bring maximum economic benefit to its people.

This apparently tongue-in-cheek comment from the Singapore Senior Minister and former Prime Minister opened the floodgates to weeks of heated debate on both sides of the Causeway.

And Lee has done it again. This time, he made what the Umno Youth described as "opening up old wounds" by calling Johor as a state "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

Lee might have deserved full marks for originality of ideas in bringing up such a subject like the remerger more than 30 years after Singapore's separation from Malaysia, and at a time when the people of both nations have largely accepted the episode as irreversible.

But the remerger controversy particularly evoked strong sentiments from both Malaysians and Singaporeans, and many Singaporeans even used the Internet to make unwarranted accusations about the state of affairs in Malaysia, including on the question of meritocracy.

It was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself who took the strongest exception to Lee's remerger remarks, saying it was Singapore's way of using Malaysia as a bogey to scare Singaporeans in order to strengthen the position of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

As matter of fact, Singapore watchers are all too familiar with this kind of ploy from Singapore everytime the general election was around the corner, such as when Lee hinted about the Singapore-Malaysia remerger.

Some political analysts in Singapore told Bernama that Dr Mahathir's reaction to the entire remerger issue during the period the debate was raging showed that he was very sharp about Lee's "hidden agenda".

In coming out with conditions for the so-called remerger, Lee was actually saying that meritocracy and racial harmony did not exist in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir had said that it was Singapore that did not practise meritocracy as evident in its discrimination against the Malays in the island republic.

He said the information he received showed that there were no Malays there who were qualified to be a Singapore Air Force pilot or a senior government officer.

" I don't believe Singapore Malays are so stupid, I may be mistaken, but that is the feedback that I get," said the Prime Minister.

Malaysians might find it puzzling that Lee has for the second time in less than a year made use of their country to further his own cause or that of the PAP.

According to the Singapore political analysts, when Lee dropped the remerger hints, the agenda was to scare the predominantly Chinese population that they might have to rejoin Malaysia if their nation did not remain tightly knit, better organised and more competitive.

" It was Lee's way of telling the Chinese that they have no alternative but to support the PAP or face the possibility of coming under Malaysia

once again," said one analyst.

Yesterday, lawyer Abdul Razak Ahmad revealed in Johor Baru the contents of Lee's affidavit in connection with his defamation suit against Singapore Workers' Party member Tang Liang Hong.

In the affidavit, Lee had said he was baffled why Tang had fled to Johor when he feared for his safety in Singapore.

"Of all places, he (Tang) went to Johor. That place is notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings. It does not make any sense for a person who claims to be fearful for his life to go to a place like Johor," Lee said in the affidavit.

Tang, who fled Singapore immediately after his defeat in the Jan. 3 general election, citing death threats against him and his family, appeared with Razak at a news conference in Johor Baru yesterday.

As Umno Youth Leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said in a statement today, Lee had arrogantly dragged Malaysia into Singapore's domestic politics.

Lee's latest remarks about Malaysia were not only insulting but also amusing on another score.

He had in fact cast doubts about the security of the Malaysian state nearest to his own nation and where Singaporeans themselves are the largest investors.

Although the grand old man of Singapore politics is about the only Cabinet member who intimately knows the sensitivities of Malaysia-Singapore political relations, his remark only shows he thinks nothing of even offending Malaysia, if this is what it takes to go after his political opponent in his own state.

Some analysts interviewed were also puzzled about Lee's intention to damage Johor's reputation, when it is Johor that is providing Singapore its vital water supply.

A financial analyst said it is hard to understand the Singapore mentality. "So many Singaporeans are living off Malaysia's prosperity and yet we find a tendency in Singapore to depress the Malaysian economy by frequently coming out with rumours about negative events in Malaysia," he said.

He said rumours emanating from Singapore about the health of Malaysian leaders were often floated to depress prices of Malaysian stocks.

"Singapore stock analysts rarely have good words to say about the Malaysian economy. I don't know whether you can call this sheer jealousy or what," he said.

Hiccups in relations between two countries are a normal occurrence but when you have a former Prime Minister like Lee Kuan Yew becoming deliberately insensitive to the feelings of his closest neighbour, you begin to wonder whether Umno Youth Leader Zahid is right in branding him today as "nyanyuk dan biadab" (senile and insolent). -- Bernama

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