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Towards better Malaysia-France relations

Yusof Hashim

RELATIONS between France and Malaysia have been given a boost with the appointment of special envoy Jean Claude Paye for France and Tan Sri Kamil Jafar for Malaysia.

The relationship has been carefully nurtured by the two leaders: President Chirac of France and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir of Malaysia. In their various meetings, they have forged close personal relations and rapport reinforced by their desire for reforms both internal and external, affecting their respective countries.

On March 28 this year, Paye spoke at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations on the importance of cooperation between regions and countries.

He said that for some time countries of the Asian emerging economies have been sceptical of relations with the OECD and the industrialised world.

He emphasised that as the Asian countries have made tremendous economic progress, there is the need for cooperation.

He is aware that relations between France and Malaysia has been low-key. French investment has been low, trade and tourism have not been active.

For a long time until recently, no French Foreign Minister has ever visited Malaysia.

He, however, mentioned some interesting areas of convergence between France and Malaysia which would uplift bilateral relations.

He said that France has been a strong country in the European Union. The same can be said of Malaysia, which has played an important role in Asean.

In the same way as Malaysia is active in the Group of 15 (G15) developing countries, France is a member of the G7 of the industrialised countries. Malaysia and France could therefore be the bridge between the two organisations.

Besides, France and Malaysia could also be the bridges between Europe and Africa and between Asean and the Asian region.

I was interested in what Paye said about cooperation extending between Asean, Europe and Africa. I mentioned to him that there is a good opportunity for French and Malaysian companies to link with Moroccan companies in investing in Morocco.

As examples, I mentioned electronics and energy. Paye agreed with me that Malaysia and France can play a role in Morocco and elsewhere.

He cited that cooperation has already been forged between the French and Malaysian companies in the construction of an airport in Cambodia.

Paye indicated that besides trade and economic relations, the two countries could also develop cultural relations.

He lamented that France has only a few Malaysian students as compared to Britain, United States and Australia.

He also hoped that very soon more French post-graduate students will come to Malaysia.

Referring to my interest in Morocco, Paye disclosed that several French architects with experience in Morocco are interested in Malaysia.

This is indeed good news for me and I am sure for Malaysians in general and KL in particular.

As I had experienced postings in Vietnam and Morocco, I am particularly impressed with the contribution made by French architecture in the way that broad avenues and sidewalks have been incorporated in the major

cities of the two countries.

We could also learn from the French about the way they manage to have the best location and striking architecture for their embassies and residences.

I remember the fine building they have just outside Bonn which overlooks the river Rhine.

In Kuala Lumpur, they have a 2.4-hectare property in the heart of the city.

Unfortunately, as Bonn will give way to Berlin and Kuala Lumpur to Putra Jaya, there might be the need to change their properties.

But knowing their ability to tame nature, the French should be able to find suitable locations adorned with buildings of striking architecture wherever they may be. On a cultural note, Malaysian visitors and Malaysian students could only be enriched by the splendour of Paris.

* Datuk Yusof Hashim was a former Malaysian Ambassador to Morocco, Pakistan and Vietnam. In his career he had served in several countries in Europe, Asia and North America.

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