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## Diplomacy a la France

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"Of course being bad-tempered, being anything but a traditional diplomat, I struggled, I shouted, I behaved the wrong way. I did everything you are directed not to do in Asia. Now, of course, I know the rules," says French Ambassador Edouard Braine, reflecting on his first few months in Malaysia.

The man many consider partly responsible for the strengthening of ties between the two countries describes his early months as a difficult time. Due to the heavy protocol, which he calls a "masterpiece of surrealism", he found it almost impossible to communicate with Malaysians.

"Yet outside this protocol, Malaysians are anything but stiff. They are kind, they laugh easily, they are easy-going, they accept you in their homes in a way Europeans would not do," says Braine.

But then, he arrived at a time when relations between the two countries, except for the necessary, were practically - to put it mildly - non-existent.

There were no traditional links that would connect the countries and Braine says the French attitude toward Malaysia was one of "benign neglect".

"There has been, in the past, a willingness from the Malaysian side, that is from Dr Mahathir himself, to do something with the French. My interpretation is that the French did not pay enough attention, we did not realise the importance of Malaysia.

"If you add to that the democratic pattern of French socialism, the fact that the Islam we know is only the Arabic version, and the fact that Francois Mitterand could not speak English. You put it all together and you have a relationship which lacked substance," explains Braine.

Then there was the disappointing visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to France in July 1994. According to Braine, his visit came at time when there were problems in French decision-making and its political system.

"We had a socialist President, we had a Prime Minister who was thinking of becoming President after Mitterand, and we had a Foreign Minister who was opposing the Prime Minister because he was supporting Jacques Chirac.

"It was not the best moment, to put it nicely, to discuss big politics. Dr Mahathir had the impression, and I fear that he is right, that his importance was not understood when he came to France. So we had to pay a high price for that.

"I got my credentials signed by Mitterand. I had to wait for more than two months to present my credentials, and in a country like Malaysia with its surrealistic protocol, you don't need to be very intelligent to get the message. But it gave me time to get my credentials changed and signed by Chirac," he says, laughing.

He had hoped that this would bring about a new beginning to relations. Chirac's views on the Middle East and his attitude toward the United States were more in line with Dr Mahathir's.

Unfortunately, it would take a little longer. France, at the time, carried out nuclear tests on the Pacific atoll of Mururoa in French Polynesia, which put another strain on the relationship.

"And so we had another time to go, although this time it was not benign neglect from the French side. My interpretation was that Dr Mahathir was disappointed with the beginnings of the new French government.

"So I had to wait from May 1995 until March 1996, feeling a bit alone

and completely lost in the jungle. Not a hostile jungle, but in a jungle I did not understand. It was difficult," remembers Braine.

Many regard Braine as a man who would go the extra mile. He was the first French ambassador in recent memory, who, if he did not succeed through normal channels, would work tirelessly to find an alternative method of getting through.

In order for Chirac and Dr Mahathir to have "friendly relations", they first had to meet. But there were no common paths. Malaysia was not on Chirac's agenda and France was not on Dr Mahathir's agenda.

It was unlikely that the leaders would meet during international conferences or summits. Malaysia is involved in Asean, the Commonwealth, the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference, the G-15 and such.

None of which includes France. So how does one bring about a meeting between two very busy leaders, who probably already have a thousand and one issues and problems to deal with?

Braine credits the work of many people - or teams, as he calls them - both Malaysian and French. Those in the French embassy who he says worked with him, together and in the same direction. He also gives credit to former Malaysian Ambassador to France, Datuk Mohamad Haron and his staff.

"We also made a team with the French businessmen. Both sides wanted better political relations. We said we will provide you with the good environment if you will play your part. So they were happy to help.

"When I had problems putting an important Malaysian visit on Chirac's agenda, I telephoned Jerome Monod, who is the chairman of Lyonnaise des Eaux and former secretary-general of the Rassemblement pour la Republique party (the same party as Chirac) and who is a friend of Chirac, for a solution.

"Of course with that kind of behaviour, you can be efficient but you cannot expect to be popular. But there I think the most difficult part was to get them to meet. After that the real achievement has been when Dr Mahathir and Chirac established this channel," explains Braine.

Since that first meeting, Chirac and Dr Mahathir have met four times. Each has appointed a Special Representative and they have advanced from simply strengthening bilateral ties to working together to assist other countries.

"Now the problem my successor will have is that we have reached something that is brilliant. We have built something solid but perhaps it has been too much on the political side. We have to bring the rest of relations to the same level, develop more on the cultural side, education and government agencies.

"I would say that the relationship now is strong, but it is time for consolidation and investment. Yet even with the current economic situation, never have I seen so many deals between French and Malaysian businesses.

"There are also several projects at the higher education level. This was one the first things that Dr Mahathir discussed with Chirac. They may not be very big yet but they are long-term projects," says Braine.

Since 1995, there have been three agreements between the two governments and five between universities in Malaysia and those in France, along with numerous business ventures and investments.

Braine says the good thing about not having strong ties initially was that things can be handled simply. When relations have been long established, they can become more difficult and complex.

"This is also what I loved about my job. Even though I have said that I had difficult beginnings, I also have to say that I have been happy professionally here because almost everything had to be created.

"We collectively had the freedom no one could enjoy today, where there

are already procedures for everything. We can say we did it our way," he says with a smile.

Special Representative of the Prime Minister to France, Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, says of Braine: "He is very hardworking and the first French ambassador who is genuinely interested in getting French companies to do business in Malaysia.

"He has been responsible for actualising and putting into practice the cooperation and friendship between the two leaders. But above all else, he is a good man."

A sentiment shared not only by those in Malaysia, but also by the people of France.

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