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Hard work ahead after winning seat

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IN the elevator at the Malaysian mission to the United Nations building, a much relieved Datuk Hasmy Agam pointed to his wife and said:

"She will be another Security Council widow."

Datin Mudlifah Mohd Yusof replied she would be able to live with that, having already gone through the mill when Hasmy was part of the Security Council team the last time Malaysia had a seat there (1989-1990).

Hours earlier, Malaysia had received the nod from the UN General Assembly to occupy a non-permanent member seat for the 1999-2000 period. It got 174 of 176 votes cast, and will join Argentina, Canada, Namibia and The Netherlands as new members in January.

But the career diplomat, who describes himself as a born worrier, did not have an easy time until the voting. Although Malaysia was the candidate of choice for the region, Hasmy felt it would only sneak in.

He was afraid that recent political events at home could colour some diplomats' perception of the country, and could result in protest votes. A country needs two-thirds support from the General Assembly, and a candidacy could be derailed if it failed to get it. If that happened, Malaysia would have to withdraw its candidacy.

A UN official had a day earlier even suggested to journalists that Malaysia could expect some protest votes. The question for Hasmy then was how significant would the protest be.

A Western diplomat assured him on the eve of the voting that the political situation back home was not something delegates would be concerned about when evaluating Malaysia.

"It's not on my radar screen. If I see a blip, I would tell you," the diplomat told him.

Nevertheless, Hasmy was concerned. He had various numbers given to him by his officers. Some were optimistic, some pessimistic. He shared with some of his officers that perhaps Malaysia would get about 155 votes, a commendable figure by any measure, but that did not ease the pressure he felt.

Hasmy did not do anything unusual that Thursday morning. He did not wear his favourite tie. In fact the one he had on was one that he seldom wore since he felt it did not match any of his suits. But Mudlifah convinced him otherwise.

His deputy Rastam Mohd Isa, however, did wear his school tie, one that he felt had always brought him luck.

Had Hasmy looked at the rows of flag poles in the UN compound that drizzling morning, and had he been a superstitious person, he would have regarded as bad omen to see the Malaysian flag draped wet around its poles, while those belonging to the other 184 members were flapping wildly in the wind.

In the end, Hasmy had nothing to worry about at all. Malaysia's stock remained high, as he would say later, and that the result indicated that delegates saw Malaysia in the larger context - how it performed the last time it was on the Security Council, its track record in the United Nations and its ability to articulate the views of the developing world.

"As far as I am concerned, it is an overwhelming support for Malaysia, except for two (votes)."

The good support received was the culmination of a few years of work after Malaysia made known its intention. As it is the slots for Asia for a

non-permanent seat on the Security Council have been spoken for until the year 2012.

The campaign for a Security Council seat was undertaken worldwide through the various embassies. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and in some cases, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad helped. But the bulk of the work was done in New York.

The way things work in the United Nations, sometimes countries trade commitments with each other. For example, in support of Malaysia's bid for a Security Council seat, a country might request a quid pro quo where it would vote for Malaysia as long as the latter would vote for it in future. But then again because the ballots were secret, nothing could be taken for granted.

As the United Nations session began in the middle of last month, Hasmy and his officers made their rounds meeting diplomats from member countries. Hasmy met almost all ambassadors to introduce himself; he had replaced long-time permanent representative Tan Sri Razali Ismail in April, and was also reminding them of Malaysia's candidacy. Some took note, while others gave their outright endorsements.

There were also the lunches and dinners, most of them held in his apartment. When they were campaigning for the 1989-1990 term, Hasmy and his colleagues took diplomats for dinners and lunches at a nearby Chinese restaurant so often that in the end he could not look at the restaurant without feeling a little bit sick.

This year's campaign was capped with a reception hosted by Abdullah last week.

"There were also a lot of last-minute handshakes and lobbying at the Indonesian lounge before the voting," he said, referring to an area near the General Assembly hall.

It was like a marketplace then, with intense lobbying everywhere. Hasmy, the career diplomat uncomfortably turned into a politician, pressing endless flesh like a seasoned wakil rakyat.

This year's election was different from the campaign in 1988 when Malaysia was competing against Bangladesh for the Asian seat. There was intense campaigning that led to Malaysia emerging the winner.

Before the voting started, one officer was assigned to each of the 12 rows of desks in the hall of the General Assembly. They were told to remind delegates to cast their votes and at the same time not to forget Malaysia's candidacy. On their desks were reminders from Malaysia, personalised to each country, in the six official languages of the United Nations, again reminding them of Malaysia's candidacy.

During the break after the voting, the congratulations began although the votes were still being counted.

"I thought then I should not worry too much," Hasmy said, but he was reminded of the ambassador from Bahrain last year whom he saw sweating while waiting for the results, although the country was a shoe-in with the Asian endorsement.

Immediately after the counting was completed, Hasmy had to put on his ear-piece to hear the results as they were announced in Spanish. There was a round of cheer, handshakes and backslapping among the Malaysian delegation. The much-relieved Hasmy, who looked quite frazzled earlier, was soon after mobbed by fellow diplomats congratulating him.

After managing to extricate himself he called his boss Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - it was almost midnight in Malaysia - to report the good news. Abdullah was elated and immediately asked him what he needed to ensure a good job in the Security Council.

They congratulated each other, as Abdullah had a hand in the campaigning, having spent two weeks in New York beginning late last month,

holding 30 bilateral meetings and attending countless others to remind ambassadors and leaders of Malaysia's candidacy.

Hasmy said apart from the obvious recognition given to the country, the Security Council seat also gave Malaysia an opportunity to contribute to international peace and security, which fall within the ambit of the body.

"Of all the organs of the United Nations, the Security Council is considered to be the executive arm of the United Nations," he said, adding that resolutions formulated there were binding.

The General Assembly, on the other hand, was more like a legislative arm and while its resolutions carried the moral authority of member countries, they were nevertheless non-binding.

For the 1989-1990 term, by all accounts, Hasmy said, Malaysia did very well. It had a good track record, it presided over the council twice and was able to articulate the views of the developing world well. It did well under pressure as among the highlights then were the shooting down by the United States of two Libyan jets and the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq.

"There is now much expectations for us to maintain our track record. We will speak and will not shirk from our responsibility."

Hasmy said the task now was to start boning up on the issues expected to be discussed next year. These include the crisis in the Great Lake region in Africa. Another is the continuing Balkans problem, the latest being Serbia's aggression against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

A remnant of the 1989-1990 session would continue to dominate the council - the economic sanctions against Iraq. Sanctions, Hasmy said, should be used sparingly and not a political weapon to punish countries which some members were not happy with. Care must be taken to ensure that sanctions did not have drastic humanitarian consequences.

Hasmy said Malaysia would also try to make the Security Council more transparent and involve other members of the United Nations through the General Assembly.

He promised that despite being in the Security Council, Malaysia would not neglect its other responsibilities in the rest of the United Nations, such as the General assembly or the Economic and Social Council.

"We plan to be visible, here, there and everywhere."

Hasmy said non-permanent members would continue to have to work within the realities that the Security Council was dominated by the five permanent members - Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States - but as was seen in its last experience, Malaysia could band together with the others to influence the decisions of the Security Council.

"There are limits to what we can do there. But we have to galvanise support from the others."

An advantage Malaysia had, he said, was that both he and Rastam were in the 1989-1990 team.

"The institutional memory is still there."

Nevertheless, Rastam said the Security Council was different now from then. For one, the workload had increased tremendously; there were 659 resolutions passed between 1945 and August 1990, and from then till now there had been 600 more. Also then the Cold War was still on, but now the Soviet empire had disintegrated.

Rustam remembers that during the height of the Gulf crisis he was often either in the office or at the United Nations, and when he did manage to return home early his daughter would be surprised.

The nature of the Security Council was that a meeting could be held at any time of the day, thus diplomats would have to be on call 24 hours a day for two years. For example, the first resolution pertaining to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait came out at 4.30am.

"We are extremely grateful and gratified to be back in the Council after

10 years," he said, adding that it would be unlikely that Malaysia could be back 10 years from now.

Asked if leading the team in the Security Council would be his crowning professional achievement, the 54-year-old Hasmy said:

"I am going to retire soon, in that sense it can be considered as a crowning."

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