

07/03/1998

Special mission to strengthen ties

Anis Kamil

I HAVE known of him (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) for a long time because everyone knows about Dr Mahathir. He is a very outspoken man.

"I remember when I received a phone call from the Elysee Palace two days before Dr Mahathir was to come to Paris. I was told that they had decided - the two leaders - that they would step up co-operation between the two countries. Each of them would appoint a special representative and would I be prepared to accept it.

"I said, I know nothing of Malaysia apart from the fact that Dr Mahathir is the Prime Minister. They told me that the question is not whether I know, but whether I was interested. I said yes very much so," recalls Paye.

Two days later Jean Claude Paye was appointed French President Jacques Chirac's Special Representative to Malaysia. His appointment along with that of his Malaysian counterpart, Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, is to strengthen relations between the two countries.

Paye, too, recalls Chirac telling him about the time he was berated by Dr Mahathir on Bosnia the first time Chirac visited Malaysia. At the time Chirac was mayor of Paris.

"There is a very frank, direct and friendly relations between the two of them. It would be interesting to find a reason. Quite clearly they do appreciate their discussions together, especially when they are discussing world policy," says Paye.

He says Chirac has a very open personality and is interested in people, including people from different parts of the world. Chirac himself has admitted to having an affinity for Asia.

"He is very much interested in the interaction between religion and politics and the diversity and successes of your country. The fact that your Prime Minister is frank and outspoken is something which our President admires," says Paye with a smile.

Although he admits he does not know Dr Mahathir well, his impressions are of a man with great vision and who cannot tolerate injustice.

"What struck me about Dr Mahathir was the degree of vision, the deep understanding of the implications of policy on politics and social problems and his great passion against injustice, be it towards people or nations," he says.

Paye assumes Dr Mahathir not only appreciates the openness and warmth of Chirac, but also that France is traditionally not as aligned as many other countries. Among the countries of Europe, Dr Mahathir considers that France has a freedom of thinking and manoeuvrability especially vis-a-vis the United States.

"There may be other elements to the friendship, I don't know, but this is the impression I gathered from their many meetings," he says.

This friendship between the two leaders has allowed the two countries to co-operate together on a global level. At the moment, France and Malaysia along with Japan are discussing possible co-operation to help the developing countries in Africa.

"This idea for this tripartite co-operation emerged in the discussions between the leaders in July last year. The idea was received by the Japanese with some raised eyebrows," Paye says with some amusement.

He explains that for some years now there has been bilateral co-

operation between France and Japan on some projects in Africa. The co-operation has been mainly in the form of ODA (Official Development Assistance).

The Japanese were surprised because Malaysia is a developing country and ODA is not a major part of Malaysia's external activities.

He adds that the ministries and agencies of Japan and France that were responsible for ODA had the impression that others were interfering in their business. And the fact that the private sector would be involved was outside their traditional methods.

"I remember when I received a call from Japan, they were a little hesitant but, at the same time, they recognised that it would make an interesting team. Three different countries with different stages of development, with different relationships with Africa bringing with them different experiences to their offer of aid to African countries.

"When we met in January in Kuala Lumpur, the Japanese were much more forthcoming. Now we are identifying areas where there are problems and the specific countries where there is a convergence of interests among the three countries," says Paye.

The challenge of this trilateral approach is not merely to co-ordinate development policies of the three countries towards a recipient country, but also to bring the private sector into the picture.

"It is interesting to find subject areas where you have not only the combination of interests of the recipient countries, but also of the three others as well as the private sector. It is an unusual approach."

Meanwhile, he says, the financial problems in Asia might make this less of a priority for the moment. Paye feels that the Asian currency problems has gone too far and beyond what was warranted.

While Malaysia's economy is stronger and less imbalanced than the other countries which were affected, the herd mentality of the financial markets affected the entire region.

Malaysia has some of the elements that initially caused the lack of confidence, for example, the impression of the lack of transparency, but he says Malaysia is in a position to re-establish confidence in the country.

"This is always the case in the process of growth. The French economy one century ago would also be seen as lacking in transparency," says Paye.

"The danger, though, has been seen in other countries that big companies, big investment firms are now beginning to go shopping. While, on the one hand, it will help re-establish the value of assets to more normal levels, on the other, it can also be perceived by the people that after having pulled down the value of the assets ... the crocodiles are coming."

He goes on to say that if the economies of neighbouring countries were to deteriorate, it would not create a very helpful environment for Malaysia. However, if one were to look at Malaysia, it has all the ingredients for recovery.

"The French companies in Malaysia are not tempted to leave the country. To the extent that business is influenced by the climate, the climate between the two countries is very good.

"Traditionally, the two countries were not accustomed to working together. French companies felt that there was no chance for them because Malaysia was part of the British influence.

"Now they have discovered that this is not the case, that they have a fair chance of doing business with Malaysia and now have partners there and so now the relationship will last because there is mutual interest," says Paye.

He does not know why he was chosen by Chirac and admits that he is not a

specialist in Asian affairs. He accepted the appointment without knowing much about Asia. The only regular contact he had with an Asian country was with Japan while he was head of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

Although he is a diplomat by training and profession, he has not had a typical diplomatic career. He was sent to private offices of Ministers, has been the head of the private office of the Vice President of the European Community commission, head of the diplomatic team of the Prime Minister and finally Secretary-General of the OECD for 12 years.

"This is not the classical career for a diplomat," says Paye. Then again the friendship between France and Malaysia has not evolved into a "classical" relationship either.

(END)