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## The state of Malaysian diplomacy

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FORTY-one years ago as the result of the passionate desire and much sacrifice (albeit bloodless) and hope, we became independent whilst remaining a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Subsequently, on September 17 1957 we became the 82nd member of the United Nations (UN).

At the start of Merdeka, thirteen commonwealth and foreign countries established diplomatic missions in Kuala Lumpur. We opened nine diplomatic missions overseas.

There were then, 6,276,912 Malaysians, based on a preliminary census report at midnight June 17/18 1957, made up of slightly over three million Malays, 2,366,656 Chinese, 740,436 Indians and Pakistanis and 95,658 others. The Malaysian population (with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia in 1963) now is nearly 22 million, sixty per cent of whom are bumiputras.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), better known as the Foreign Office, oversees British activity in the fields of diplomacy and international relations. Wismaputra does the same for us.

Running Wismaputra is not like running the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Agriculture because the very nature of diplomacy is not quite as straight forward. What we do or don't do depends on many factors which in many cases - no matter how good the Malaysian diplomats are - cannot be foreseen, much less controlled. This is even true for a superpower like the US. It was true in 1957 and even more so now with 185 independent nations and a hundred international organisations in the world.

There are 85 foreign diplomatic missions including a UN representative office in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia has 79 diplomatic missions at various levels overseas: 54 ambassadorial, two Permanent representatives, nine charge d'affaires, 10 consuls-general, two consuls and one deputy high commissioner.

Despite the economic meltdown, we can't close any of these embassies, although we may delay in opening new ones and we could reduce the personnel in some missions. Some of our missions are directly concerned with political and strategic interests imperative to the furtherance of our foreign policies and security and these missions may even have to be strengthened and consolidated.

Diplomacy is the art of persuasion, accommodation and compromise. Not even the only remaining superpower - the US - can attempt to impose all its desires in the hostile international environment in which it functions.

The American attempt to devastate and prostrate Iraq is a good example. I have no doubt that Washington has the military power to further devastate Iraq and other means to deprive the Iraqi people. At the same time, it will not try to deteriorate the situation unless it has substantial support from the international community through the UN.

The life of a diplomat, whether one likes it or not, revolves around dinners, receptions, visits, games and in some countries the participation in customs and rituals no matter how antiquated and wasteful they are. Few people without imagination can be expected to comprehend this.

Because diplomacy is an art, like all other arts it eludes scientific analysis. Nevertheless, its successes and failures can and are quantified. When the Malayan Foreign Service was established in 1957 (a few officers were sent for training a year before independence to Britain, Australia

and India) it was run by Datuk Nik Ahmad Kamil (later Tan Sri) with Ghazali Shafie (later Tan Sri) as deputy permanent secretary (now called secretary-general). The first Minister of Foreign Affairs (then called the Minister of External Affairs) was Tunku Abdul Rahman himself. Until the late seventies the Foreign Ministry had always been headed by the Prime Minister except for a brief period when it had been lead by Tun Dr Ismail bin Abdul Rahman.

In 1957, the total personnel (diplomats and supporting staff) of Wismaputra was less than 100; now it is 1,039 including 282 diplomats. The first home of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the Federal Secretariat housed in the Sultan Abdul Samad Building (now the Supreme Court) opposite the Royal Selangor Club in front of Merdeka Square where Tunku declared Merdeka at midnight on August 30 1957.

Our greater wealth, the increase in the number of bilateral relations, the involvement in multilateral organisations, increased trade, commerce, defence and security interests and other subjects which have been inextricably woven into diplomacy and international relations, have made us grow rapidly, especially in the eighties and nineties.

Wismaputra, like the civil service as a whole, has had to increase its staff to cope with its growing responsibility and the growing complexities of international (and national) life. Staff grow. It is natural because new responsibilities and tasks have emerged which must be tackled. In fact, the number of Malaysian diplomats has grown far less proportionately than most other ministries although their workload and areas of coverage have grown almost beyond the imagination of their founding fathers.

It is a great credit to these diplomats for a job well done. There is still vast room for improvement if Malaysia wants to be taken as a consistently serious player in international, regional and sub-regional diplomacy.

The one thing which we lack is expertise or specialised skills in several crucial areas such as nuclear disarmament, human rights, international finance, law, land mines, weapons and treaties, nor do we have a section which deals exclusively with economic affairs. We should have an economic section as the emphasis of international relations today has moved from politics to economics.

Of course, Wismaputra has several officers who are knowledgeable but there is a vast difference between an expert in nuclear, biological, chemical weapons as well as nerve gas and someone who is merely knowledgeable.

The other aspect which needs to be looked at seriously and urgently is the proficiency in foreign languages and even Bahasa Malaysia of our diplomats. There is no doubt, on the whole, of the unquestionable ability and intelligence of most of our diplomats, However, if they lack language proficiency and social graces, their confidence will suffer.

I am never worried about the size of an organisation as long as it is not wasteful and out of control. As long as it produces what the Government and national interests deem absolutely imperative we should not be pound foolish and penny wise.

It needs to be remembered that all significant changes in the sizes of staff (upwards or downsizing) of any ministry or department follow changes in national policy and changes in functions, responsibilities and the state-of-the-art technology in multi-media and communications. As a result of the currency devaluations, Wismaputra has also suffered like any other organisation. Wismaputra has borne burdens before, although this one is a little heavier due to the economic crisis.

Malaysia, despite the bad publicity and the difficult political and economic situation, was easily elected for the third time to the powerful

UN Security Council. This is a great honour for Malaysia. Thailand and Indonesia were members of the Security Council twice.

The Malaysian diplomats have a good reason to congratulate themselves - I know because I have been involved with Wismaputra since the days of the Indonesian Konfrontasi. By and large, our diplomats have scrupulously been suppressing their own individual political viewpoints - especially during the Indonesian confrontation, the separation with Singapore, the race riots, political developments in the eighties and the current Anwar Ibrahim crisis - to loyally represent the national policy and attitudes as instructed by the Government.

So long as this is always sustained there is no compelling practical nor political reason not to choose our potential diplomats from the most intelligent and socially well-adjusted; however restricted and rarefied it may appear.

While knowledge in politics, history, economics and philosophy is essential as is social adequacy and grace, they are not everything in foreign affairs and diplomacy. The true impact of these possessions is enormous, and certainly cannot and must not be ignored.

Over the years and more so in future, the attitude of Malaysian diplomats will count for much in their work. What I mean is that while they are Malaysian nationals, they must have no religious or racial prejudices. They must be forward looking while simultaneously not ignoring the realism which exists at home.

Diplomats live in a succession of different nations and cultures and the skillful ones will never ignore the non-economic and non-political factors operating in the world diplomacy and international relations.

All members of Wismaputra, branch 'A' officers in particular and their wives are liable to be called upon to make speeches in public. This is something most ambassadors and special envoys have often and sometimes, these speeches are carried by the mass media.

What's worrying, according to a very reliable source, is that neither the civil service, the police, the military, Wismaputra nor the political arena are getting quality recruits. It would seem as if every top graduate, both foreign-educated and home-grown, shuns the Government service because of the poor pay, conditions of service, the slow and poor prospects of promotions as well as the yards of bureaucratic red tape.

If you are liked, it is not unknown for an officer of average ability to be promoted, bypassing ten to sixteen senior officers above him. Resentment against increasing bureaucratism, rigorous protocol and wasteful ceremonies causes frustration for those already in the service and keeps talented Malaysians from joining the Government service.

There will be enough recruits who find it hard to get jobs in private sector, but they will generally be of poor quality. And unless we get candidates of quality, we may in the long run suffer and be satisfied with the average Malaysian who may lack, amongst others, urbanity, poise, a quick wit and toughness in negotiations.

I would like to recall a fair observation made by the late Tan Sri Zain Azraai, a good friend of long standing. Zain, one of the prominent and distinguished civil servants, the epitome of a pukka diplomat of any nationality who was schooled at the right institutions - Victoria Institution and Oxford - was offered to the creme de la creme of postings (the UN and Washington), once said to me: "You know, the civil service may appear to have suffered because of many reasons but make no mistake, there are some exceptionally able young officers in both the Home and Foreign Service. Several are of high calibre."

The Civil Service is the oldest, costliest and most influential of all our institutions. I have observed with fascination the civil service for

over forty years; got to know several top personnel very well; the key people who made up the profession, including those latent officers who discreetly mould public policy just like the "back-room politicians" who formulate and influence the direction of our various policies.

I absolutely agree with what Zain said. However, I would like to add this; we should improve this standing army of power in order to enhance and sustain the survival of the nation it serves.

All diplomats, especially when overseas, are expected to socialise, entertain and be entertained. They should build up personal as well as official relationships with officials of the host country if the best results are to be obtained and friendly and cordial contacts maintained.

I was for thirteen years an operative in the Prime Minister's office, holding various ranks (1963-76), four years a backbencher in Parliament and many years an Umno divisional leader and in the private sector until I became the Special Envoy of the Government of Malaysia at the UN in 1996.

I can say with humility that I have seen and done it all or at least been there, for which I am grateful. Life as a diplomat or the spouse of a diplomat is different from that of a politician. Just as life for a Malaysian diplomat at home differs from his life abroad.

For instance, unless the Malaysian diplomat is very senior he is not expected to devote too much time to socialising with the foreign diplomats; his social responsibility is left to his personal discretion. It should ideally be rare whereas abroad it is an important part of his job.

In our New York Permanent Mission, we have presently a mid-level Home service officer on attachment for three years. Once this officer returns to Home service, just like his counterpart in Wismaputra (when he is transferred home) and unless he is promoted to the top of his respective bureaucratic hierarchy he leads, I'm afraid, the life of a civil servant of his rank without much of the "glamour" which he had enjoyed at the UN. For this Kelantan-born officer, the New York assignment should change his perspective and views and this could only be good for him. Rarely have there been (one or two maybe) cases of Malaysian diplomats "losing" their "keperibadian bangsa" - national identity for having served too long overseas.

They either lacked imagination or deliberately acted as if they could not imagine the changes that had taken and are taking place at home. There is no substitute really for regular direct contact with one's own country and living in Kuala Lumpur after say, three or five years abroad.

Of course, there should be exceptional cases as in the case of Tan Sri Razali Ismail, who retired last summer after ten years as our Permanent Representative to the UN, to date the longest holder ever to hold the job since we became a member of the UN.

Razali was a special case because he did return home regularly and as a result was in direct contact with what was going on rather than just via reading cables and home newspapers. He was perceived to have changed little. He was the President of the 52nd United Nations General Assembly, a year before he retired in 1997.

Broadly, the ranks of diplomats at our embassies or missions are ambassador or a senior minister depending on where the mission is), counselor, first secretary, second secretary, third secretary, attaches while at the Consulate General - Consul-General, Consuls and Vice-Consuls.

This is an established order of precedence. Where does a Special Envoy stand? He is given a personal rank of ambassador with specific duties. A special envoy by nature of his appointment has special functions, some rather vague and murky as an iconoclast once said.

Malaysia is one of the more progressive Muslim nations. We have always

had women in our foreign service; three have retired as ambassador and four ambassadors are still in service. Several never went far because love and marriage intervened and as a result one or two potentially good diplomats left the service, one of whom was the late Maimun Din, who became the first woman secretary-general of a ministry.

I do not believe any of the Malaysian female ambassadors was ever married while in service; two are divorcees, one never married. The four still in service are all unmarried.

I have lived in Washington DC, London, New York and visited Malaysian Missions in most parts of the world, some of which are regarded as hardship posts. To those Malaysian diplomats who are always complaining, I should emphasise that the degree of enjoyment, interest and fun does not depend on where they are. The right attitude is needed.

I have met one or two Malaysian diplomats who are unhappy and miserable in good postings while at the same time I had meet many happy Malaysian diplomats in what is politely described as "unglamorous" capitals. Realistically speaking there is no nation which is completely uninteresting. Life, work and enjoyment are what one makes of them.

No one can make a melancholy and pompous brat happy anywhere. One must learn to accept life as it comes and make the best of it; taking the silk smooth patches and going through the bad patches in equal measure. I know a junior diplomat who is happier than his ambassador yet he lacks the privileges, perks and social accessibility of his boss but he is endowed with one thing his boss lacks - the right attitude towards work and enjoyment.

We have had four Prime Ministers and many Foreign Ministers. The Tunku was an Anglophile and was pro-Western. In the end, though not in the way that anyone had foreseen, he ended his term with a changed perspective. Tun Razak reoriented Tunku's domestic as well as foreign policies with verve, depth and foresight.

He led the nation with forceful enthusiasm. He died young and too quickly to have finished what he started. Tun Hussein Onn became the unexpected heir and left office after five years, as the Far Eastern Economic said, without a ripple. A very senior minister once told me that Hussein left office because he could no longer cope with high office.

Datuk Sri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his eighteenth year in office, has done much for the nation. He started with some disadvantages which soon disappeared. He has, up to now, outmaneuvered two serious unsuccessful bids for his job. Mahathir's next book should be on how Malaysian men or women are to obtain power and keep it.

Wismaputra's role - as our first line of defence - at times does seem limited by internal inertia. However, like fairly inert chemicals it will not only survive but perform its tasks acceptably and occasionally, remarkably. Remarkably, we are the first Bahasa Melayu-speaking nation whose diplomats can sincerely say with a grin; "what a lovely country we have got to represent."

We cannot let our standards slip now.

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