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Singapore-Malaysia

ACADEMIC SUGGESTS M'SIA-S'PORE EMINENT GROUP TO RESOLVE DIFFERENCES

SINGAPORE, April 10 (Bernama) -- A local academic has suggested that Malaysia and Singapore form a council of eminent persons including elderly statesmen to draw on the historical and personal ties between the two countries to resolve any differences in private.

The council would take a low profile to "nip in the bud" bilateral, political or economic differences, said Nanyang Technological University banking and finance associate professor Tan Khee Giap who proposed the panel be called the Malaysia-Singapore Reconciliation Council.

"A lot of things are difficult to bring up on a government-to-government level without the loss of face. This council can be the middleman...we desperately need this bridge given what has happened over the past few years," said Tan when contacted after the Business Times reported his idea today.

Ties between Malaysia and Singapore, which were briefly one country in the early 60s, had been patchy over a number of issues. The flare-ups have cooled after Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, agreed to resolve outstanding bilateral problems as a package.

"Basically, what we have seen over the past few years is that whenever there are issues, they get overheated. When the leadership from both sides overreact, they bring about a reaction from the public at large," said Tan is also a consultant to Singapore's Ministry of Trade and Industry and Asian Development Bank, among others.

He said many Singaporeans were basically ex-Malaysians and "a lot of things can be discussed in good faith with less confrontation between the personalities".

Such a group would "understand the language, thinking and chemistry" to bring the two countries closer and evolve into a platform for the younger generations from both sides, he said.

Tan said members of the council must be well-respected and acceptable to both sides.

"They must be able to work informally and yet be influential with both governments to provide concrete solutions," he said. From Malaysia, Tan said the possible members could be former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba and Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee who heads the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia.

While for Singapore, he suggested Ambassador-at-Large Dr Tommy Koh, economist Lim Chong Yah and Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies director S.R.Nathan.

Tan said he was making the suggestion as a neutral party.

"If Singapore raises it and Malaysia is not interested, then there is a loss of face. I am an academic, if nobody takes it up, there is no loss of face.

"But if Malaysia and Singapore are keen, I think the timing is right," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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