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Dr Mahathir-Habibie meeting will clear air on many matters

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INDONESIAN President B.J. Habibie and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have a lot to catch up with each other at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur today since their first bilateral meeting in Batam on May 20.

Habibie's current visit, to reciprocate the Prime Minister's Batam trip, should prove to further strengthen ties between the two friendly neighbours as well as between the two leaders.

Among the topics expected to be discussed are extension of land leases for Malaysian investments in Indonesia and other trade issues, foreign workers, the situation in East Timor and Aceh and the recent presidential elections.

Some observers have questioned the timing of such a meeting. Admittedly, Habibie still represents the government of the day, but one would need a crystal ball to predict who will be the next President of Indonesia.

The Batam meeting was especially significant in that it was their first meeting since Habibie assumed the presidency a year ago and it took place less than a month to the Indonesian general election.

Perhaps, more importantly, the meeting resolved whatever "awkward" feelings that might have been generated by Habibie's personal support of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Speaking at the end of that meeting, Dr Mahathir had said: "This meeting really helps us clear up bilateral problems, keeps us updated on each other's problems and to find ways and means of solving problems in ways not detrimental to each other."

In response, Habibie had said at the meeting that he was grateful to Dr Mahathir for making the visit and that he was honoured to personally receive the Prime Minister and exchange views with him.

At the meeting, he had referred to Dr Mahathir as his "senior partner".

As a "partner" and leader of a good neighbour, Habibie never ceases to amaze the region and the world.

In fact, his taking over the presidency was itself a surprise. Many, including Indonesians, were taken aback when Suharto stepped down as President after ruling the country for more than 30 years and named Habibie as his successor.

At the time, many thought that Habibie was simply a continuation of the old regime, with a new face. He had been closely aligned with Suharto, whom he considered a "father".

"I never planned to be President, but I am not a coward. I will do my best to lead Indonesia. Man proposes, God disposes and history records," Habibie said soon after becoming President.

Habibie however, surprised many people when he released political prisoners and loosened the tight control of the Press. Despite a tendency for protests to become violent, the army was more restrained than it had been in previous years.

His ability to surprise continued. He criticised Malaysia for the way the Government was handling the case of Anwar, a man he described as "a dear friend".

The Indonesian Foreign Ministry was quick to point out that he was speaking in a personal capacity and not as President.

To many Malaysians, it was a surprising statement to come out of Indonesia; it was most definitely not the "Asean way" of doing things.

A few months later, he complained that Singapore was not doing enough to help its needy neighbours.

Relations between Malaysia and Indonesia, or maybe more correctly between Malaysia and Habibie, did not improve when he cancelled an official visit because of his workload. Yet, five days later, he was able to meet Anwar's daughter, Nurul Izzah in Batam.

He did, however, eventually attend a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec), which was the first time he met with Dr Mahathir after becoming President.

Then, in January this year, Habibie made another surprise move, reversing a position his country has held for more than 20 years, announcing that if East Timor rejected the proposal for autonomy, the province would have its independence by Jan 1, 2000.

After what has been called the "freest and fairest" elections in Indonesia's history, and most probably one of the longest vote counts in the world, there were no clear winners.

The Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri won 34 per cent of the votes, while Habibie's Golkar party won 22 per cent.

The 500 Parliament members, plus another 200 appointed officials, will choose the next President in November.

While Megawati and Habibie are the two top contenders, no one is yet willing to predict who will be Indonesia's next President.

Then again, the man with a doctorate in aeronautical engineering may spring yet another surprise.

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