

Lee: Dr M paid heavy price over Anwar issue

Star 18 AUG 2000

KUALA LUMPUR: Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said he feels sorry for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for paying a "very heavy price" in the issue of the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the subsequent events.

"I felt more sorry for Dr Mahathir than Anwar," he told a press conference at the end of his visit to the country.

In response to a question on the international criticism over the nine-year-jail sentence meted out to Anwar and whether Singapore considered itself a friend or enemy in the matter, Lee said:

"Singapore is not an enemy.

"If anything, it is a friend. You must not forget that.

"We have extremely close ties with the leaders in Malaysia — including Anwar — when he was deputy prime minister and we know each and every one of them very well."

Calling the whole issue an "unmitigated disaster," Lee said he felt Dr Mahathir had made several errors of judgment which were "most unfortunate".

Lee said when he met Dr Mahathir in Davos in January 1999, shortly after Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister, he asked why the Internal Security Act was used as Anwar was not a national security threat.

Lee said he was flabbergasted when Dr Mahathir said he

himself did not know it would be under the ISA and it was the prerogative of the Inspector-General of Police.

"I thought it was the beginning of a series of blunders that cost him dearly," he said.

He believed Anwar should have been charged a day after his arrest under the Penal Code for corruption, sodomy, or "whatever" and should have been allowed bail.

Lee said another blunder was not to set up a Commission of Inquiry after Anwar's black eye incident.

"I thought that would not absolve him (Dr Mahathir) from blame but it would have cleared doubts that he was a party to it," he said.

He agreed with Dr Mahathir that he (Dr Mahathir) did not benefit from Anwar getting a black eye.

"I'm afraid he's paid very dearly. I'm sorry for him and my sympathy is for him."

Lee said he also had sympathy for Anwar who had so much going for him when he was deputy prime minister and looked set to take over.

To a question on whether Umno would recover from the issue, Lee said it could if the right steps were taken.

He said this included injecting the original ideals that drove Umno, bringing in a fresh generation untainted by money politics capable of drawing up an agenda to attract the young Malays.