

27/11/2000

Dr M's standing in Singapore undiminished despite prickly relations

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IT may be naive to conclude that Malaysia and Singapore now enjoy a romantic fairy tale relationship.

But however bumpy the Government-to-Government relationship can sometimes get, the notion that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is unpopular among ordinary Singaporeans may be totally inaccurate.

On Friday, as soon as Dr Mahathir finished performing his Friday prayers, he was swarmed by scores of Singaporean Muslims who congregated at the Ba'alwi Mosque in Lewis Road.

Singaporean security officers responsible for ensuring the Prime Minister's safety had a tough time trying to stop them from getting near him.

Dr Mahathir, however, obliged and was touched by the gesture. The congregation was honoured to have the region's longest-serving head of Government join them for Friday prayers.

Perhaps, these Singaporeans are aware that Dr Mahathir's actions have stuck out like a sore thumb most of the time, only to be proven right in the end.

When the Informal Asean Summit came to a close on Saturday, it was proven that Dr Mahathir's ideas cannot be ignored.

His vision for an East Asian grouping comprising all Asean nations as well as Japan, China and South Korea dismissed as irrelevant when it was mooted in 1992, was resurrected and accepted.

Countries like Japan and Singapore which objected to the East Asia Economic Caucus have now begun to realise that such a grouping will augur well for the region.

The East Asian nations now agree that they need a grouping similar to the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement so that they will have a stronger voice in international forums.

Speaking at a Press conference at the end of the summit, Dr Mahathir said after the financial crisis, countries began to realise that it was important to have a grouping. "It is necessary that East Asian countries go into a huddle to discuss any new ideas, globalisation, for example. Globalisation is touted to be very good for everybody, including the developing countries. But is that so? Let's go through it, let's do some modelling to see what happens when we embrace globalisation."

The leaders attending the summit agreed on Friday to set up a study group to look into the possibility of formalising an East Asian grouping. At present, Japan, South Korea and China only serve as Asean's dialogue partners.

Eight years ago, the last time Singapore hosted the Asean summit, the grouping endorsed the establishment of the EAEC.

The Singapore summit in 1992 had endorsed the Malaysian proposal but changed the name from East Asian Economic Grouping to EAEC. Dr Mahathir's idea was for the grouping to establish a loose, consultative forum to promote co-operation and protect members' interests.

The United States, the greatest proponent of freedom of association, had opposed the establishment of the EAEC from the start, claiming that the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation was sufficient.

At the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98, Dr Mahathir didn't spare his words when he accused currency manipulators of causing

the crisis by selling down regional currencies.

The Prime Minister was then accused of being an economic illiterate. But it took only several months for the likes of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and even financier George Soros to admit that currency speculators played a key role in causing the economic downturn.

Now, the entire international financial architecture has come under scrutiny.

Malaysia, under Dr Mahathir's stewardship, is a believer of the prosper-thy-neighbour policy. Countries can be impoverished by selling down their currencies for short-term gains. But impoverished nations cannot possibly offer good markets to the richer nations. Loss of such markets will in the long run affect all countries, economically.

Given these circumstances, Dr Mahathir's prosper-thy-neighbour policy was accepted as a guiding principle for the Initiative for Asean Integration (IAI) endorsed by leaders at the summit.

The IAI will focus on education, skills development and worker training in Asean member countries.

Dr Mahathir's vision for a trans-Asian railway link to integrate Southeast Asian nations with China was also given a boost at the summit when leaders endorsed the route stretching from Singapore to Kunming in China.

The route will span over eight countries - Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Malaysia and Singapore.

Thailand has been entrusted to raise the US\$2.5 billion (RM9.5 billion) needed to construct the rail link which will cover 1,016km.

River and sea communications will also be upgraded to integrate countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei which are not on mainland Southeast Asia.

China, Japan and South Korea agreed to work towards an "Asian IT Belt" linking technologically-developed cities like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Shanghai, Tokyo and Seoul.

All in all, the summit went quite well with leaders reaffirming their commitments back on track with a package of measures to integrate economically, politically and physically.

Underlining their commitment to action, the 10 Asean members agreed that at the summit in Brunei next year, they would have a "report card" showing how far these measures have progressed.

Probably, the only sticky issue was Thailand's refusal to support Myanmar in future International Labour Organisation meetings, as the former accused the latter of human rights abuses and forced labour.

At a meeting between Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan and Myanmar's Win Aung on Wednesday, Thailand made it clear that it would abstain from voting when the issue of Myanmar's labour policy was raised at future ILO meetings.

Last Thursday, the ILO adopted sanctions against Myanmar for its forced labour, rejecting an attempt by Malaysia to put off action.

An attempt by Asean to secure a unified backing of Myanmar was vetoed by Thailand.

Thailand's stand is a glaring departure from Asean's cardinal principle of non-intervention enshrined in the Treaty of Bali.

Thailand has in recent years been advocating a "flexible arrangement" to replace the non-intervention policy, allowing an Asean "troika" to look into the domestic problems of a member as and when necessary.

It may be unacceptable to others. But this is a good sign. At least now, Asean, for a long time dismissed as a talkfest, can agree to disagree. Democracy, after all, is alive and kicking.

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