

20/08/2000

Kuan Yew's visit raises more questions than answers

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WHAT will Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew tell the folk back home? That he was impressed with Putrajaya? That he enjoyed the less-than-three-hour drive from the island republic to our capital? Or that he was appalled to find a groundswell of cynicism in this country today?

Although some of his officers said the four-day visit was a sightseeing tour, his itinerary gave him ample time to check out developments and gauge the political temperature.

He met with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad twice, dined and deliberated with other leaders on several occasions and even managed an hour with a bunch of journalists who were as curious about his visit here as he was about their take on the political situation in Malaysia.

So, after gathering the information from various quarters, what is he likely to tell his people?

And how will his visit affect the future of bilateral relations between the two countries?

The answers to both questions may be found in the cutting comments he made at a Press conference on the last day of his visit, just hours before his flight home.

The Senior Minister made - to the surprise and discomfort of many - several illuminating remarks about Dr Mahathir's predicament vis-a-vis Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's arrest.

He said the circumstances which led to Anwar's sacking was an "unmitigated disaster".

He spoke of errors in judgement and the series of blunders which occurred before and after Anwar was placed under detention.

Lee also related parts of a conversation he had with Dr Mahathir (in Davos) in which the latter told him that he did not know Anwar would be arrested under the ISA (it was left to the police) and that he was not informed of the black eye until much, much later.

The Senior Minister said he was flabbergasted when Dr Mahathir told him this.

Lee also talked about the level of cynicism among Malaysians, a perplexing phenomenon which he said he gleaned from discussions with local journalists.

That the Government felt it necessary to re-enact the Grik arms heist to placate cynics was another source of amazement to him.

"It is ridiculous," he said, that people were questioning the Government over the heist.

Of course, these views were not offered unsolicited. As one of his officers was quick to point out, Lee was only answering questions posed by journalists.

But solicited or unsolicited, Lee has never been known to pull punches.

So those who have made it their business to scrutinise his words and movement were not at all surprised by his statements on political and social developments in Malaysia.

After all, did he not describe Johor as a place notorious for car-jackings?

And, was it not reported some time back that he told the Filipinos (when they invited him to their country) that their problems stemmed from having "too much democracy"?

His caustic remarks about former Indonesian President Dr Habibie's ability as leader also prompted the latter to fling back the retort that Singapore was just "a tiny red dot" in the region.

Still, Lee's views on Malaysia, on Dr Mahathir's split with Anwar and the unfortunate circumstances surrounding it, on what he found to be disturbing at the grassroots has caused a stir.

The Asian Wall Street Journal is insisting that Lee's remarks could set back efforts to resolve long-standing bilateral issues.

It turns out that some political analysts here also agree that bilateral ties will be affected.

"The broad swathe of official Malaysia is still wondering about the purpose of his visit," said one analyst.

"Many of us are confused: was he supporting Dr Mahathir or belittling him?" asked another.

"What right has he to come here and tell us what to do," demanded another.

But not everyone interviewed felt that Lee did more damage than good to the sensitive political situation in Malaysia today.

The fact that Isis had to turn away so many who wanted to attend Lee's talk on East Asia on Wednesday is an indication of the high regard he continues to enjoy in Malaysia.

"Perhaps as Asean's elder statesman, Lee felt he could be frank. After all, who can say such things now? There is no one else in the region that commands as much respect as Lee and Dr Mahathir, said one political scientist who read five newspapers to get a feel of the Press conference.

Lee's visit, interestingly enough, has also sparked renewed interest in his son, Brig Gen Lee Hsien Loong who is the island republic's Deputy Prime Minister.

"If the son is to become Prime Minister," said a political observer, "the father's trip here may have been necessary to ensure that his appointment would not get a hostile reception."

After all, said the observer, there are indications that bilateral relations may get colder in the post-Lee era. For one, the future leaders do not share the historical ties which the elder Lee has with senior Malaysian leaders.

Yet another theory for Lee's visit is the message it sends to Premier Goh Chok Tong. "Lee may be telling his PM that if he (Lee) is still needed to put bilateral relations back on the right track, then Goh had better get his act together."

Lee said at the Press conference that he was leaving Malaysia a little more optimistic than when he came, where bilateral issues were concerned.

But it is not known if anything substantial was discussed on the five issues affecting both countries.

Still, we hope his instincts are right.

And, if we care to be optimistic as well, we can read his visit as an attempt to reach out.

It could even be a tacit acknowledgement on the part of Singaporeans that the island cannot remain aloof, that it cannot be an oasis of calm if there is instability in the region.

The island republic must know by now that its fate is inextricably linked to that of its neighbours.

We may, of course, be reading too much into such a short visit.

Perhaps he came over for nothing more than to see Putrajaya and the Petronas Twin Towers.

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