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Senior Minister Lee sees himself in role of `facilitator`

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, still wielding considerable power in the island republic's administration, sees himself as a facilitator in promoting bilateral relations with Malaysia.

In an exclusive interview with the New Sunday Times in Singapore, Lee, who was Prime Minister for 31 years until 1990, claimed he has little influence on issues affecting relations with Malaysia, but said: "If I can facilitate a resolution, I will try to do so." (See Page 27 for the interview).

Lee arrives Monday for a four-day visit at the invitation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The two met in Tokyo during the funeral of Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in June.

"When I was in Tokyo I met Dr Mahathir. I asked to see him. He offered to see me at 8am because he was leaving (for home) at nine. I told him I want to see Putrajaya, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Petronas Twin Towers and all the other things."

Among the major issues seen as "irritants" to Malaysia-Singapore relations are the long-term water supply to the island republic and the status of Malaysia's railway land there.

When told that he was being modest, and that he still wields considerable influence over Singapore's present-day Cabinet, Lee countered: "That's what everybody says, but let me remind people ... I've just signed a letter asking for leave of absence from the Prime Minister (Goh Chok Tong) to go to Malaysia."

"The political significance is that the authority is the PM's. My indirect influence comes from my ability to influence the MPs. If they don't respect my judgment, then I have no power, because the buttons are not with me. My influence comes from the record of 40 years of decision making. The MPs know that I'm not given to wild judgments."

In the one-hour-40-minute interview in his office at the Istana, Lee gave his insights into Malaysia-Singapore relations, the Malaysian political landscape, in particular on Umno, Pas and the DAP, the Indonesian situation, Asean and other regional issues, Singapore's defence spending and its politics, the loyalty of the Malays to Singapore, his achievements and regrets.

Lee also sees himself in another role for Singapore - that of a salesman. In his modest but well-guarded office, Lee also gave his views on Australia's role in South East Asia. But the interview was heavily edited and the published extracts is only about one-third of what was recorded. As for the rest, they would be kept in the archives to remain as yet another backdrop to the story of modern Singapore's founding father.

Offering some very frank opinions, Lee said he did not see Pas forming the Government here as they have to change to win seats in the peninsula's west coast, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. (Johor is a Barisan Nasional stronghold, particularly Umno's).

But he noted the significant number of young Malay professionals joining Pas. "If they grow in strength and displace the present Pas image of the goatee beard and the white skullcap of the devout Muslim, with that of a modern Malay professional, that's a different challenge," he said.

As for the DAP, Lee said the party leaders believed that the so-called Barisan Alternative could work but later saw itself "punished in the elections". The DAP, he said, was now making "different noises" because

the situation in the BA was becoming untenable.

Lee also believed that the DAP was carried away by reformasi.

Lee also has some interesting views on Umno, including his observation of selected leaders. When asked about the party's future, Lee said he believed that Umno should upgrade Vision 2020 and bring in more of the younger people to help "re-cast" itself, adding that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister, has to help put up a credible team for this purpose.

Describing Abdullah as straightforward and decent, Lee stressed that the Kepala Batas MP must get "good people around him". While Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein may be "all right" for Umno Youth, he should get a young Malay in his 30s as his deputy, who can then help to "espouse the new Malaysia".

Lee expressed sadness over news that Suharto had been charged, predicting that the day would come when the Indonesian Government would put resources to rehabilitate Suharto's image. Suharto, Lee emphasised, had given Indonesia and the region 32 years of peace and growth. While he was quick to point out that he did not agree with what Suharto's children were doing, he saw no gain by destroying the symbols of a nation.

On the relationship between Malays and Chinese in Singapore, Lee, in measured tones which characterised the interview, said: "We brought the issue out into the open because we believe, over time, not only do we desensitise it, we will also be able to talk frankly, that it takes time for us really to gel into a nation.

"A nation is not born simply by going to school, singing the National Anthem as you raise the national flag, and when you graduate in 10 years, we are a nation. People have to feel that they have a shared destiny. Do we feel that? I'm not yet prepared to say so."

In any case, Lee was sure that Chinese-Malay relations in Singapore are not decided in Singapore alone. "They are affected by Malay-Chinese relations in Malaysia and to a lesser extent Indonesian-Chinese relations in Indonesia."

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