

Mahathir, Lee point the way for myopic bureaucrats

THINKING ALOUD

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OBSERVERS OF MALAYSIA-Singapore relations will certainly be relieved with the agreement reached in the last few days. There was no doubt that kudos must be given to the two leaders, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, for their resolve and determination to move the relationship forward.

There are some who were surprised by the speed with which the agreement was reached. I would only attribute this to the roles played by the two leaders. They have taken the initiative and moved away from the bureaucrats, who presumably have been adamant and procrastinating, hence the stalemate in relations. This latest exercise shows the importance of strong and determined leadership, which clearly exists in both countries.

The agreement also illustrates the pragmatism of both leaders. It is hoped that the bureaucracy from both sides will follow the lead of the two leaders, instead of their own myopic thinking. The agreement established could well provide the right kind of framework for a mature relationship, one that is more realistically

does not mean that the individual should be ignored. It should not be seen-as a zero-sum game.

There is also a discrepancy in the rights of the individual over the community, especially when a small group is threatening the peace and stability of the country. There is always the silent majority. If that majority remains silent, then the minority will indeed rule over them. We cannot allow this to happen. Therefore, we need to ensure that as many citizens voice their opinion and support the government.

The other issue is over the right to a good life of a high standard of living. What is the point of championing human rights when poverty and deprivation are ubiquitous? Look at some of our neighbours, who claim to be not only democratic but that they have championed human rights. In these countries, there is a wide gap between the haves and the have-nots. I see little point in having a good human rights record while ordinary citizens do not enjoy a reasonable standard of living.

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structured, rather than imbued with a heavy emotive dosage. There is no doubt that new challenges will emerge in the future, but with this framework, both sides will be able to deal with them in a much more professional manner.

Malaysia-Singapore relations are critical to both sides from all perspectives: political, economic to race relations. Most of the outstanding issues are the result of historical legacy and with it, a high emotional content. The relationship cannot be taken for granted and the constant contact between the two sides can only be good. This must be continued and stepped up.

Of late, there has been much discussion on human rights in Malaysia, mainly following the report by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission or Suhakam. I am in agreement with the prime minister when he argued that we should not be influenced by a Western interpretation of human rights. We must admit that many of us have been unduly influenced by such Western concepts.

There are many issues in this context that-one could highlight. I would, however, like to dwell on two points: The first is the different emphasis between individual and community rights. I believe that in developing societies and economies, the rights of the community should take precedence over those of the individual. This

I think Malaysians should be aware that there is such a thing as the rights of the community, which I believe are paramount. Public safety is of utmost importance and the government is obliged to ensure that it is maintained.

We have recently seen the ugly threat of militant Islam surfacing. We know of the horrendous crimes committed in the name of Islam.. where women and children have been slaughtered. No one wants this to happen in this country and that is why we should stand up and support the government's actions. However, I still think that the government should be consulting the public much more and accept constructive criticism with open arms and ears. Many of those who have been critical only mean well.

In my book, the record of the government on human rights is something that needs to be discussed in the right perspective, one that reflects a Malaysian interpretation, rather than a Western and alien one. Under scrutiny the West too falters. We must now adopt a much more comprehensive approach. In this respect, Malaysia can play a positive role in taking the lead to come out with a much broader interpretation of human rights. I am sure we are not alone in our frustration with the domination of Western concepts.