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Setback for Asean+3 secretariat

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"I think I am trying to understand the Asean culture ... I am beginning to learn." These were the words from an official in the Malaysian delegation after the Foreign Ministers at the 35th Asean Ministerial Meeting dumped Malaysia's proposal to set up an Asean+3 Secretariat in Kuala Lumpur.

Perhaps, they should understand the Asean culture, politics and language where neighbours are sensitive, suspicious and envious of one another.

Singapore and Indonesia are the strongest opponents to the idea. "We cannot have two bus drivers," said an Indonesian delegate expressing concern that the Asean+3 secretariat would take the shine away from the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta.

In fact, there were talks that Singapore was trying to "neutralise" the idea by inserting the word "no consensus" in the joint communique which noted Malaysia's offer to host the secretariat.

Malaysia had offered RM38 million as seed funding for the secretariat for five years and a yearly allocation to bear its operational costs. Yet, the members remain unconvinced.

Malaysia made three offers and all were rejected. When the first proposal failed to get through, Malaysia offered to have a branch of the Asean+3 unit in Kuala Lumpur.

When that idea was disregarded, Malaysia called on the members to agree in principle to have an Asean+3 secretariat.

"We made a radical suggestion, but I think the feeling is that we should move slower at the director-general's level.

"We will adopt a step-by-step approach until our view in respect of the secretariat can be fully realised," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Malaysia's proposal was meant to prepare Asean for stiffer competition from Central/Latin/North America (Free Trade Area of the Americas), Europe (enlarged to include Eastern Europe) and East Asia.

But Malaysia's greatest disappointment at the meeting was why certain member countries declined to support its idea.

And could a consensus be reached if the idea came from countries other than Malaysia?

Ironically, when Japan suggested the setting up of a separate secretariat for the Asean Regional Forum, the Philippines was quick to support such an idea "because of the importance of ARF".

"This is the irony of it all. It is paradoxical, when we talk about economic co-operation, they are very fearful. When it comes to security, suddenly they said its okay," said an official.

The members should be more cautious and sensitive about ARF, which touches on security matters, whereas in the AMM, members talked about economic co-operation.

"Asean sometimes has the tendency to be too careful. They say step-by-step .. evolutionary, you must move at a pace you are comfortable with," said Syed Hamid.

But observers say, this is the favourite language used by Asean members to derail each other's initiatives.

Some Asean members have been saying that the organisation has to be more agile, to make it more relevant, but it is puzzling that sometimes their judgments seem contrary to their beliefs.

Despite the setback, Malaysia has indicated that it will continue to

pursue the idea. The Plus 3 members (China, South Korea and Japan) are supportive of having a separate secretariat for Asean+3.

Japan has gone on the record to indicate that it supports the idea.

There is a consolation for Malaysia. The setting up of the Asean+3 unit could provide a foundation for Malaysia to pursue its efforts to institutionalise Asean+3.

Fears over the Asean+3 secretariat overlapping with the functions of the Asean secretariat must be allayed.

A senior Malaysian official was not demoralised by the AMM decision.

"We have achieved our objectives. We want to see the institutionalisation of Asean+3. The secretariat is not the end of it all because we have succeeded in making Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's vision of seeing Asean+3 becoming a reality."