

17 FEB 2003

S'pore-Dispute

NAME-CALLING, S'PORE'S WAY IN DEALING WITH DISPUTE

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Feb 17 (Bernama) -- The verbal sparring episode in the love-hate relationship between Malaysia and Singapore after their divorce in 1965, took on a more dramatic twist with the republic resorting to name-calling and character assassination as a way to dealing with their dispute.

Singapore's chief target is no other than Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad after his disclosure on Friday that his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, has opposed the building of a new bridge to link both countries.

On Saturday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) here called Dr Mahathir an "entertaining storyteller" for saying that Goh has opposed the construction of the bridge because he was nostalgic over the Causeway, and claimed that Goh has blocked a plan to replace the Causeway with a new span.

"Prime Minister Mahathir is an entertaining story-teller," an MFA spokesman said in a statement.

Yesterday's Sunday Times focused on two main stories on Dr Mahathir, one an article headlined 'Dr Mahathir - the storyteller' and another tracing the history of the Malaysian premier headlined 'It started with a snub'.

The 'storyteller' article focused on the MFA's response to Dr Mahathir's remarks in Johor on Friday that Malaysia will proceed with the construction of the new bridge on the Johor side despite the lack of cooperation from Singapore.

Dr Mahathir also revealed that he was informed by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that Goh was not in favour of the project. "Because he (Goh) has a sense of nostalgia over the Causeway, he (Lee) said that we (Malaysia and Singapore) can construct the bridge after Goh Chok Tong's retirement..this is what he (Lee) told me," Dr Mahathir said.

The second article by its senior writer, Susan Long, delves into history to understand Dr Mahathir, "as the one man who looms large in the ongoing disputes Singapore is having with Malaysia."

Dr Mahathir, in her intro, was described as a young, brilliant medical student in Singapore in the 1940s, taking a break from his studies to go on an outing.

"He had cheerfully directed a Chinese taxi driver to take him to the home of a woman friend. Then his smile froze: the taxi driver unceremoniously dropped him off at the servants' quarters of the house. For someone who had always worn his Malayness and ideas of social justice like a bridge of honour, that proved the ultimate snub," writes Long in the Sunday Times.

In short, she says, "Dr Mahathir Mohamad is the first Malaysian Prime Minister to have studied in Singapore, and perhaps his years here at the King Edward VII College moulded views that have stayed with him the past century."

"He sees Singaporean Chinese as mercenary, insular, selfish, arrogant and never having crossed the Causeway. Ironically, however, his years here also taught him one thing: Money has to come first if he wants to put Malays first."

From storyteller, Dr Mahathir is now a spin doctor. At least this is what his counterpart Goh Chok Tong now calls him.

Goh's description of Dr Mahathir was in quotes in today's Straits Times. Headlined 'Spin Doctors, Nostalgia, And Other Distractions', the newspaper published quotes of Goh's remarks to what it describes as 'verbal assault from Dr Mahathir'.

On Dr Mahathir's 'jibes' after Singapore released letters between the leaders on both sides to show why bilateral negotiations broke down, it quoted Goh as saying: "Many Western leaders employ professional speech writers to give a spin to their positions. Dr Mahathir is a very good spin doctor."

"Compare him to the best, I think he spins a story very well. We in Singapore are less good at spinning stories. We prefer the more serious approach, giving facts and figures," Goh said.

Goh described himself as more of a practical person than a nostalgic person, when asked to comment on Dr Mahathir's remarks that he was nostalgic over not wanting to demolish the 80-year-old Causeway.

"I'm more a practical person than a nostalgic person. Yes in some instances, I am a romantic at heart. In my younger days, I loved novels and I liked literature but I chose economics as my subject...at university. So the practical side of me ruled."

Some call it verbal sparring, others call it verbal attacks. Goh calls the ongoing spats between Malaysia and Singapore as verbal acrobatics. He said he has no intention to engage in verbal sparring with Dr Mahathir.

"You engage in further verbal acrobatics, it'll get us nowhere. It'll distract the people and this not a time to distract our own people. Certainly from our point of view, we want to speak quite frankly to Singaporeans about the economic situation, about further retrenchments...and how to cope with slower growth for this year."

Today, a tabloid owned by MediaCorp Press has a front page lead story on Goh's description of Dr Mahathir as a spin doctor.

"While analysts from both sides of the Causeway are still scratching their heads about Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's remarkable oratory in Johor last week, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong summed up the man and his performance in two words yesterday: Spin doctor."

But the Singapore media's attack does not just stop at Dr Mahathir. Syed Hamid is also not spared.

On Dec 29, 2002 columnist Chua Lee Hoong of the Straits Times described Syed Hamid as being known for his verbal flip-flops and contortions, or what might be called his 'Albar-risms.'

Malaysia and Singapore are locked in a dispute over the price of water and the sovereignty of Pulau Batu Puteh or Pedra Branca as Singapore calls it.

On Feb 6, both sides signed the special agreement to refer the Pulau Batu Puteh dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) but they remained deeply divided over the issue of sovereignty of the island.

Goh said yesterday that he did not want to engage in further verbal acrobatics with Dr Mahathir. But will this stop the Singapore media from spinning its wheel on Malaysian leaders?

-- BERNAMA

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