

30 OCT 2003

S'pore-Mahathir

SINGAPOREANS WILL MISS DR MAHATHIR

SINGAPORE, Oct 30 (Bernama) -- Tomorrow, the man who shaped Malaysia's policies towards Singapore for the last two decades retires as Prime Minister and will pass on the baton to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Despite flashes of irritation at Dr Mahathir Mohamad's acerbic rhetoric, Singapore leaders do not underestimate his achievements in shaping Malaysia into one of the world's top 20 trading nations, analysts said.

They have also expressed optimism over post-Mahathir Malaysia and lauded him for having developed "solid foundations" for his successor to build on.

"I think there's a lot of admiration among Singaporeans for Dr Mahathir's vision of a modern, multi-racial Malaysia and courage in pursuing it and, of course, his transformation of Malaysia into one of the most advanced nations in South East Asia," political observer Seah Chiang Nee said.

Many people were particularly full of praise for his actions against racial and religious extremism, his daring battle against feudal Sultans, for English language and "backward" practices of the Malays, he told Bernama.

"It's hard for anyone to emulate without running into trouble," said Seah, a veteran journalist and now Editor of LittleSpeck.com.

But Singaporeans, he said, also "rightly or wrongly see him as having personal adverse feelings against Singapore" which had spilled into bilateral relations in recent years.

"People still remember his reference of "many ways to skin the cat (Singapore)," he said.

He noted that in recent years there had been a sharp deterioration of bilateral ties, erasing many of the diplomatic gains in earlier years.

"Most people I talk to have high hopes that Mr Badawi, after a period of consolidation, offers better chance of better ties," said Seah.

"In a year's time, Singapore will have a new Prime Minister. This leadership change in both territories actually augurs well if both sides grab the opportunities offered by history," he added.

He said not only was Malaysia changing, but Singapore, too. A whole new generation had grown up here with a fresh mindset about Malaysia and other neighbours, he added.

Seah said: "The voters, better educated, better informed, are taking over. The people have changed, the People's Action Party (PAP) has changed, the Members of Parliament (MPs) have changed and so have its leaders."

After covering Malaysia off and on for more than 35 years, Seah, who is also a columnist with The Star, said: "My expectation for the future is tempered but gradually I believe in the common sense of both societies."

Singapore's Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, told the Bangkok Post recently that Dr Mahathir "is leaving behind a good ship with good officers and an engine working very well."

As such, his successor, Abdullah, should be able to carry on with the process "without too much difficulty", he said, describing Abdullah as a capable leader whose abilities had been underestimated by observers.

"Most people have underestimated Abdullah Badawi, in my estimation. I think that he has much more than what people think he is capable of," he

said.

"I see him being able to lead Malaysia upwards along the development path," noting that "the challenges I think he will face include the challenge from PAS. That's a political challenge."

Singaporeans will always remember Dr Mahathir for his verbal vitriol, especially at the peak of the water dispute, with his remarks and quotable quotes hitting the headlines.

The most notable are his remarks during his visit to Johor in February this year to review plans to replace the Causeway.

Said Dr Mahathir: "Singaporeans are not strangers: they are our brothers and sisters, our kin...in Singapore, there are roads but when shifting into fourth gear, you fall into the sea because it is not big. It is only 18 miles from Keppel harbour to the Causeway. You buy a Ferrari you can't change into fourth gear; there is no use. So we want to give them the opportunity to change into fourth gear on our roads."

Former Prime Minister of Singapore, now Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, dubbed Dr Mahathir as a 'Malay ultra' in his Memoirs, but acknowledged that the Malaysian Premier was different from his predecessors.

In his book 'From Third World To First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000', Lee wrote: "The Tunku, Razak and Hussein Onn were from the aristocracy or the traditional ruling families associated with the Sultans. Like me, Mahathir is a commoner -- a trained professional doctor and a self-made politician."

Dr Mahathir, said Lee, had asked his Ministers and officers to learn from Singapore.

"No other Malaysian Prime Minister or Minister has ever publicly said they had anything to learn from Singapore; Mahathir did not suffer from this inhibition. This open-minded attitude of learning from anyone whose success he wanted to duplicate in Malaysia distinguished him from his predecessors."

Despite his differences with Mahathir, Lee said: "I made more progress solving bilateral problems with Mahathir in the nine years he was Prime Minister, from 1981 to 1990, when I stepped down, than in the previous 12 years with Tun Razak and Hussein Onn as Prime Ministers."

Mahathir, he said, had the decisiveness and political support to override grassroots prejudices to advance his country's interests.

--BERNAMA

SS SS SRI