

18/01/2004

Abdullah's practical approach brings both sides back to table

Syed Nadzri

DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's style and approach seemed to appeal so much to the Singaporeans in his brief visit to the island republic last Monday that even the normally frosty Straits Times had a story titled Abdullah Boleh? the following day in praise of him.

Among other things, the article said: "Making his first visit to Singapore yesterday as Prime Minister, he brought to the table a proven record of 5Cs: competence, consensus, compassion, circum-spection and, last but not least, being clean.

"All these attributes and keeping his nose to the grindstone got him into Malaysia's hottest political seat."

The accolade was probably the result of Abdullah's suggestion in his meeting with Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong that the two countries revisit outstanding bilateral issues by going back to the negotiation table rather than the courtroom.

Given the acrimony between Malaysia and Singapore over the years, the rapprochement was something swift and, to many, quite unexpected.

After all, it was just five months ago that Gordian knots had formed into some of the bilateral problems, leading former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to state that the door to negotiation was closed and arbitration was the only solution for the dispute over the price of water supplied by Malaysia to Singapore.

So what actually happened in that meeting room at the Singapore Istana that somewhat assuaged the whole thing?

"Nothing extraordinary," says Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

"It was just the affable Datuk Seri Abdullah with his open attitude. And the two leaders saw the importance of their longterm relations which should not be issue-related."

Goh's view, according to Syed Hamid, was that bilateral relations should move forward and not be distracted by the outstanding issues which should henceforth be put aside for third party arbitration.

But Abdullah, he adds, preferred that the two sides give talks another try and was much in favour of looking for new ideas and thinking out of the box.

"Prime Minister Goh then said okay.

"He was agreeable to that suggestion and said that arbitration would only be as a last resort, while Datuk Seri Abdullah said he would get back with some very, very specific issues and some suggestions on how the outstanding issues could be resolved."

At that meeting, Abdullah also called for more flexibility and proposed that the two sides treat the issues on their own merits and not as a package.

They also agreed that issues that had reached third party arbitration - like the territorial dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh and Singapore's reclamation works on the east and west sides of the island - be left to that recourse.

Apart from the disagreement over the price of water, among other contentious issues is the proposed construction of an elevated bridge to replace the Causeway over the Straits of Johor.

The shifting of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu station from Tanjung Pagar to Woodlands; the relocation of the Malaysian Customs and Immigration Complex

at Tanjung Pagar; the Central Provident Fund withdrawals by Peninsular Malaysian workers in Singapore; and the use of Malaysian airspace by low-flying Singapore air force jets are other contentious issues.

Abdullah's more accommodating style has, however, led some into thinking that Malaysia is conceding ground and whether it now means that the country has softened its stand in dealing with its southern neighbour.

"No, it is not about softening the stand," Syed Hamid maintains. "It's just about being practical."

The Foreign Minister says Abdullah's approach on Singapore is consistent with Malaysia's foreign policy that disputes and conflicts between countries should be resolved through discussions and dialogue.

"In fact, that was the approach Malaysia took the last five or six years when Dr Mahathir was Prime Minister. In fact, the idea of settling the issues as a package came about in the course of negotiations then.

"I don't think it is a departure or softening of position. It is more of a sincere commitment and intention by both sides to find a solution," he adds.

Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore Datuk N. Parameswaran, attributes the more-dialogue stance reached at the meeting of the two leaders to Abdullah's diplomatic credentials.

"The negotiation approach surely appeals to him as he was Foreign Minister for so long (1991-1999). Furthermore, the two Prime Ministers have become good friends and get along very well.

"Naturally, being close friends you'd want to talk things over if there are problems," he adds.

Parameswaran says many people on both sides of the Causeway are sceptical about whether discussions would yield any solution at all considering that the water issue never looked like it was heading for a settlement despite many rounds of talks.

"Sceptics will forever remain sceptics," he philosophises. "But let's give the two leaders a chance, because underneath the smiles and handshakes, we can see a desire that both are doing their best to bring a new look into the whole episode."

What then will be the next step now that it is back to the negotiation table?

Abdullah had indicated during Monday's meeting that since both sides were agreeable to discussions, he would get back to Goh with "some very, very specific issues and suggestions on how we can resolve these issues".

Syed Hamid says Wisma Putra is already working on it and will come up with whatever is necessary as soon as possible to get talks moving again.

But he adds that whatever debates and discussions taking place by the two sides after this will be low-key and will not be in the limelight lest they get too many input and become entangled into knotty controversies once again.

He says that Abdullah already has some ideas in mind on how to handle some of the specific issues.

Syed Hamid feels that the water issue is the most important of all and needs to be given priority because once this is solved, the other problems will follow suit.

In negotiations between ministers and senior officials of the two countries in Kuala Lumpur in July 2002, Malaysia proposed that Singapore pay 60 sen per 4,500 litres - instead of the 3 sen now - until 2007 and RM3 from 2007 to 2011, after which there should be a new formula.

Singapore, however, proposed to pay 45 sen per 4,500 litres until 2011, after which the price was to be fixed at 60 sen until 2061.

Syed Hamid says everyone has to be realistic about the water talks and not to expect it to be resolved immediately now that the two sides have

decided to have another try.

"We are not saying that it will definitely be resolved (through talks). But at least we are not closing the door.

"Furthermore, it is not an intractable situation and the atmospherics (for an amicable discussion) is good."

In the meantime, officials from both sides are eager to prove that bilateral relations are not only back on track but is moving forward.

Goh and several senior ministers are expected to attend the national-level Chinese New Year celebrations in Johor Baru on Saturday at the invitation of Abdullah.

The following day, Abdullah will travel across the Causeway with a group of Malaysian ministers for a social gathering hosted by the city state.

The Malaysia-Singapore annual games involving their Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Ministries of Home Affairs as well as the annual games between senior administrative officials of both countries will also resume soon, after a lapse of a few years.