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## The Malaysian trait in Shaukat Aziz

By Syed Nadzri

IF Shaukat Aziz has, as some people say, nine lives, then he must have been a Malaysian at some point before. That's what he came across as anyway, when I met him in Islamabad two years ago.

The charismatic Prime Minister-designate of Pakistan, who survived a harrowing assassination attempt last week, was once an expatriate banker working in Kuala Lumpur. But it was not so much this that made him so Malaysian-like in my eyes. Rather, it was his style, his thinking and, more than anything else, his interest in Malaysia and Malaysian politics.

Aziz, who has been Finance Minister for the past five years, is due to take over as Prime Minister from Zafarullah Jamali before the end of the year. Last Friday, he had just finished addressing an election campaign rally near Islamabad when an explosives-filled car ploughed through a security cordon into his sedan. The ensuing blast killed seven people and injured 30 others. But Aziz miraculously escaped unhurt.

I had the honour of meeting this remarkable man during an assignment in Pakistan in June 2002 with the then NSTP group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad. Our main task of interviewing President Pervez Musharraf over, I joined Abdullah the following day to call on several ministers, one of whom was Aziz.

Like the exquisite briyani we had in Peshawar a few days later, the best I have ever tasted (even better than in Penang), the encounter with Aziz was an eye opener.

Aziz looked very distinguished in his designer suit when he came out to greet us. And the first thing he said when he looked at me was, "I have met you somewhere, haven't I?" But that was nothing compared to what was to come deep in the conversation. He spoke lucidly and asked so much about Malaysian politics.

Issues relating to the leadership succession and the premiership of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at that time seemed to interest Aziz a lot. He knew most of the Umno leaders by name and was very familiar with the Umno system.

Aziz also seemed to be well-versed with Malaysian protocol and forms of address, often referring to names with their titles, such as Tan Sri this or Datuk Seri that, which most foreigners are not inclined to do. And some names were mentioned with raised eyebrows or in hushed tones, indicating great understanding of the characters he was talking about.

Aziz worked for the Citibank Group most of his life, which explains his immaculate English, which explains the Americanised-Pakistani tag pinned on him by detractors, which in turn is probably why some Pakistanis want him dead. But let's leave Pakistani politics aside.

I found that he looked several shades more refined than most of his colleagues - a technocrat competent in economic management, plucked from the gut of global banking to become one of Musharraf's most trusted confidants.

During that meeting, I asked Aziz, whom I knew so little about then, how he knew so much about Malaysian politics. "Of course I do," he replied. "I was there in KL several years ago and I loved the place so much."

Indeed. Aziz was based in Malaysia for three years from 1982 as country manager for Citibank. His many other international postings for the bank included one in Singapore about 10 years ago and while there, he often commuted to Kuala Lumpur to rest and relax.

It is said that he was once identified as a potential CEO of Citibank by its former co-chairman, John Reed, and that he was willing to forgo the comforts of a high-flying corporate position to come home to Pakistan surprised many.

"This is national service," he once said.

Aziz is well-known for the many economic reforms he introduced after becoming Finance Minister in 1999 and in most of his policies, he often uses Malaysia as one of the model countries.

"I admire the achievements made by Malaysia, especially in diversifying the economy and the measures to increase exports," he said.

When Aziz saw us off after the meeting, he said half in jest that the vibrancy of Malaysian politics made it interesting to follow and reminded Abdullah to keep him abreast of developments.

And hardly a week after we came back from the Pakistan assignment, Umno had one of its most-remembered general assemblies. That was when Dr Mahathir dropped the bombshell about stepping down.

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