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Ball in Aussie court with Abdullah at helm

By K.C. Boey

IF Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is seen to have aced a hole or two in his round of golf with Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, his deliberations with the broader Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Jakarta over this week put the drinks at the 19th hole in perspective.

The message the media sent home of a "post-Mahathir thaw" in relations has been moderated by the realisation that institutions, policies and broader engagement matter more than individuals in relations between nations.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has left the national and international stage, but much of the issues of concern to Asean, the Asean Post-Ministerial Conference and Asean Regional Forum remain.

Over the past 20 years or so, Australians - more particularly the media - have reduced the relationship between Australia and Malaysia to one between individuals.

When Downer visited Kuala Lumpur three weeks ago, Dr Mahathir's absence loomed as large as his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. From the time Abdullah took the reins last October, in the popular - media - perception, he was framed in terms of his predecessor.

Dr Mahathir for as long as he had been in charge was seen - for entirely personal reasons - as the obstructionist who locked Australia out of the region and Asean.

Might the change in leadership herald the opening of the door for Australia?

The suggestion was put to Downer at his joint news conference with Syed Hamid in Kuala Lumpur. "I wouldn't always try to reduce things to personalities," Downer responded. Still, personalities matter.

A lecture in Melbourne on Monday filled two function rooms of the Monash Conference Centre in the city.

The Centre for Malaysian Studies, of the Monash Asia Institute, and the Asia Society AustralAsia Centre had collaborated to present a lecture by social anthropologist Professor Shamsul A.B.

Shamsul is director of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation and the recently established Institute of Occidental Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

A frequent commentator on Malaysian current affairs in the local and international media, he was speaking on the personality of the moment in Malaysia.

"Separating Substance from Rhetoric: Malaysia's new Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi - early days in office" drew an abundant mix from the academic community of Monash University, the business and government interests of the Asia Society, and a good number of sojourner and expatriate Malaysians.

Business and the international relations community wanted to feel the pulse of stability of the new administration, and the climate for foreign investment.

Shamsul is optimistic. In Abdullah, he sees a moral, inclusive leader who will bring a balance to the competing interests in politics and economics, the national and the international, a leader who "simply has no interest" in making enemies of anyone.

If Tunku Abdul Rahman was the father of independence, Tun Abdul Razak the father of development, Dr Mahathir the father of industrialisation and

IT (hand-picked by Tun Hussein Onn), history would mark Abdullah as the "Popular moral leader".

And what of this focus on personalities in the Australia-Malaysia relationship?

"Institutions cannot articulate relationships," Shamsul rationalises. To that extent, personalities matter, in the mood and ambience that individuals bring to international forums.

Abdullah had served as Foreign Minister in Dr Mahathir's administration. He is known to the international community. He brings a positive start to the Australia-Malaysia relationship.

"The test (for a fresh start) should come from Australia," says Shamsul. "It is up to Australia to make the move."

Mark Baker, Asia editor of The Sydney Morning Herald ] and The Age in Melbourne, travelled with Downer to Kuala Lumpur, and is with him in Jakarta this week for the Asean Foreign Ministers meeting, and the Post-Ministerial Conference and Asean Regional Forum to follow.

Baker fears the "policies and style" of the Government of Prime Minister John Howard "remain a potential source of more friction".

He writes: "The Malaysians are wary of Howard's preoccupation with the American alliance, and see racist overtones in his Government's immigration policies, especially in the treatment of boat people."

International relations specialists Dr Scott Burchill and Professor Joe Camilleri echo that analysis.

For Professor Marika Vicziany, director of the Monash Asia Institute, the new leadership in Abdullah throws up a challenge for Australia. On this, Vicziany agrees with Shamsul. In her closing remarks of thanks to Shamsul, she hoped Australians would take up the challenge of the ball in their court.

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