

10/01/2004

Listening for a new start

Syed Nadzri

RELATIONS between Malaysia and Singapore, often described as complicated and jerky, look set to enter a new phase when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi visits the republic on Monday.

The first thing that would surely come to the minds of people on both sides of the Causeway is whether the new Prime Minister would provide fresh impetus to straighten the "crooked bridge" or to tide over the "water issue".

The crooked bridge and the water issue are by now well-known expressions on two of the many contentious subjects leaders of the two neighbouring countries have had to grapple with over the years - a spat in the media one day and kiss-and-make-up the next.

Singapore has also given an early indication of how it perceives the change in the Malaysian leadership when its Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar spoke in Parliament the other day of the republic's desire to leave the acrimony of the "old era" behind and let bilateral ties move forward.

But observers in Malaysia say it would be very unreasonable to expect Abdullah to bring about a paradigm shift simply with this visit.

First, it is primarily a courtesy visit by a new Prime Minister on a neighbour, a practice that is customarily observed among Asean members. And it is a short visit by any standards - five hours.

Squeezed in that time-frame will be a ceremonial welcome at the Istana, a call on President S.R. Nathan and separate meetings with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

"To expect our Prime Minister to get down to the core and settle outstanding issues one by one is a bit too much," says a Malaysian official.

Furthermore, the official adds, Abdullah will be in Singapore to "listen more than talk" and that such brief meetings are mainly to exchange pleasantries more than anything else.

Singapore, meanwhile, wants to be seen to mark Abdullah's visit as a start to better things, its leaders using such words as "multi-faceted" to describe relations with Malaysia, which they say, go beyond any single subject.

Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore Datuk N. Parameswaran agrees with that evaluation.

"While it cannot be denied that we do have problems, at least there is an acknowledgment among leaders that our ties are multi-faceted. And the public on both sides must understand that it is all not just about five or six issues.

"Our trade and tourism links, for instance, are strong. There is very close co-operation between our police forces and last year the authorities worked very well with each other in the face of the SARS threat."

Parameswaran says Malaysia-Singapore relations should be measured on a people-to-people level and because of this it may not be too accurate to predict or anticipate a new phase to come with a new prime minister.

The sibling closeness, he adds, is consistent and cannot be measured in phases based on one or two thorny issues.

The High Commission, however, has good vibes about Abdullah's maiden visit to the republic as Prime Minister.

"The atmospherics of the visit are good because both Prime Ministers seem to connect well. At the height of SARS last year, when Abdullah was

the Acting Prime Minister, the two leaders were in touch with each other.

"Then there was their bilateral meeting in Tokyo during the Asean-Japan Commemorative Summit last month where they again hit it off pleasantly. Later this month Goh is expected to join Abdullah at a Chinese New Year open house in Johor."

Singapore is Abdullah's third destination in his Asean tour. He was in Brunei last month and Jakarta on Thursday.

A Malaysian Government official says the new Prime Minister will be very much at ease through his foreign itineraries because he was Foreign Minister for eight years from 1991, a long tenure by comparison.

Abdullah, he says, was Foreign Minister when former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, establishing and rejuvenating ties with many countries, including non-traditional trading partners.

So on that score, Abdullah is no stranger to the art of diplomacy and settling thorny bilateral disputes.

But this trip to Singapore is not about settling issues and problems, although in the course of discussions, specific topics might crop up as a matter of course.

The crooked bridge issue, for instance, is expected to at least be mentioned now that it has resurfaced as a hot topic in the media and among certain politicians on both sides.

This concerns the plan to build a bridge to link both countries to replace the existing Causeway, requiring each side to undertake the construction in their respective territories.

Singapore, however, is reluctant to do that, causing Dr Mahathir to declare in August last year that Malaysia would go ahead with its half of the project which, when completed, would cause the link to look like a crooked bridge.

One of the reasons Goh gave was that he had nostalgic attachments about the Causeway and didn't want it demolished.

Considering the mood of Abdullah's visit on Monday, officials are not discounting that this subject could feature in one of the discussions, even over lunch at the Istana.

"You can expect a very cordial atmosphere on Monday with a little coat of caution underneath," says another official.

Singapore, he notes, is about to go through a leadership change and Malaysians understand that.

"Right now, the axis of influence could be seen as being apportioned between the Prime Minister, his deputy and the senior minister. When the changeover takes place, maybe we can see a slightly different scenario."