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Malaysia a big name on South Africa's map

By Balan Moses

JOY was written on the face of Dr Abraham S. Nkomo as he watched the life telecast of the installation of South African President Thabo Mbeki for a second term.

The South African High Commissioner had been watching the familiar faces flashing on the television screen since early last Tuesday as his country celebrated its 10th Freedom Day.

In similar scenes around South Africa, people were rejoicing as they celebrated anew freedom from the shackles of apartheid and its attendant rules that had once kept them from realising their potential.

The medical practitioner-turned-diplomat, always ready with suitable words to describe any situation, was at a momentary loss for words as this writer asked for comments on the situation.

The poignance of the situation may have been overwhelming as he remained glued to the television in the High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, acutely aware that he was thousands of kilometres away from the action.

But Nkomo was quickly back with words that probably reflected the sentiments of million of his fellow South Africans that day: "It's a great day for South Africa."

And it was a day that could not have been imagined not too long before 1994 when the African National Congress swept into power, sending apartheid into oblivion.

It has been a long road for the the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela, Mbeki and others at the helm of the party who have steered the nation to success since 1994.

"The Government has performed exceedingly well and in doing so has answered those who spoke of the (proverbial) day after (freedom) and whether the new South African leadership could manage to keep the country together," he said in an interview.

Nkomo himself is proof of the fact that the ANC and the people of South Africa have accepted the baton of leadership with considerable ease from the previous regime.

South Africa-Malaysia relations is also testimony of how far the nation has come from the dreaded days of apartheid when it was largely excluded from international affairs because of domestic policies.

Today, Malaysia is a big name in South Africa, in both the political and economic senses.

There was a temporary setback in the late 1990s when the Asian Financial Crisis took the momentum out of joint economic activities, which at that point had seen RM6 billion in Malaysian investment in the nation.

"It was of such a magnitude that Malaysia was up there among the leaders in terms of investment. But the Asian Financial Crisis put paid to the momentum. But we are well on our way towards getting back there."

Heading the effort is Telekom Malaysia, which has helped with the initial public offer for Telkom South Africa, an initiative that has been a resounding success.

The high visibility that Telekom Malaysia has assumed in South Africa was clearly evident at the Freedom Day celebrations in Kuala Lumpur last Wednesday when the names of the two telecommunications giants were prominent.

"Malaysia has played a sterling role in the political and economic development of South Africa. Both our nations are destined to work

together in many things to come," he said.

One area in which both nations have already worked out a healthy working relationship involves the Non-Aligned Movement where Malaysia is the incumbent chairman and South Africa the immediate past chairman.

They are in communication through Nkomo and the Malaysian section on NAM in Wisma Putra headed by Ambassador Tan Sri Hasmy Agam.

Hasmy has been tasked with the job of liaising with his counterparts in South Africa and Cuba, which has been elected the next chairman.

The troika will meet in Kuala Lumpur on May 13 to discuss the tense situation in Palestine and steps to be taken to bring peace to the troubled land.

Nkomo is in the thick of discussions with Malaysian authorities on the matter.

"The South African experience in fighting for freedom and equality has placed the nation in the best possible position in the peace process. South Africa and Malaysia can work together in this effort.

"Malaysia has helped us in the past when we needed help and I am sure that we can work together to bring peace to Palestine."

Two names indelibly linked to South Africa's past - Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Mandela - came up at this point.

Nkomo said both leaders had played important roles in charting a future for South Africa with "Mandela having a special relationship with Dr Mahathir".

Malaysians are also making waves in areas like property development and the leisure resort industry.

Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew of Country Heights is proving that his reputation as a builder is well earned with his interests in a golf club in the exclusive Pecanwood area.

There is also Malaysian interest in property development in the Mid-Rand area with the Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad believed to be looking at a project in the Paarl Valley area.

"Things are looking up. We are ready for Malaysians to come in to help us in various areas," he said, adding that the telecommunications fields was ripe for investment.

Nkomo said that while South Africa may be seen in many respects as a developed country, there were actually two parallel economies.

"The first is the more developed economy of the pre-freedom days with the other being the economy linked to those who had missed out on the earlier era."

This is where he feels Malaysia and other countries with specific expertise and commonalities can enter with assistance.

"There is a lot to be done and we cannot do it alone. This is a wonderful time for Malaysian captains of industry to move in."

The bilateral relationship has also developed on the educational and cultural fronts with 89 South Africans at the Multimedia University in Cyberjaya here.

The South African effort to enlist Malaysia's help in walking the road of development may include an unlikely manifestation: a Putrajaya look-alike in the country.

Nkomo is not saying it but this could be the crowning glory of the bilateral relationship.

Note: The latest bilateral trade balance stands in Malaysia's favour with RM1.3 billion worth of products exported to South Africa and RM800 million imported from that country.

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