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Causeway for optimism

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MALAYSIAN High Commissioner Datuk N. Parameswaran feels a wind of change in Singapore. BALAN MOSES examines the new atmosphere in the bilateral relationship, with reporting by RAVI NAMBIAR.

NOW that the broad parameters of Malaysia's "newfound" relationship with Singapore have been charted out by the two Prime Ministers, a great deal of what will transpire next depends on the people at 30 Hill Street.

There is no doubt about the Malaysian High Commission being equal to the task, the stormy bilateral relationship of the past probably providing the best possible training ground for what lies ahead.

There is some comfort in the fact that the man who will deliver the tone and substance of Malaysia's stand on dealings with Singapore comes with the necessary diplomatic pedigree.

After a colourful exit from a United Nations appointment in East Timor in 2001, Datuk N. Parameswaran ran into a wall of resentment in Singapore over statements he made relating to his host's intransigence.

Parameswaran, appointed High Commissioner after several "exchanges", is clearly one who calls it as he sees it.

He holds an optimistic view that the diplomatic road ahead for both countries will be less rocky than the past.

Of course, his views come with a qualifier. There should be a suitable amount of restraint on the expectations of what can be achieved in the near term.

"The channels of communication have been opened and this augurs well for future relations. The friendship between leaders from both sides is spontaneous. They are after all old friends," he said in an interview at the Sentosa Golf and Country Resort in Singapore last Sunday.

Parameswaran was very much in the thick of things as he liaised with Malaysian and Singapore officials to shepherd a happy ending for all that weekend.

It may have been difficult for the affable envoy who has been caught in the middle of the verbal jousting from both sides of Causeway. There was also the ignominy of allegedly being talked down to by a much younger diplomat soon after his posting, which saw him speaking his mind on the matter.

Parameswaran is thus justified in wearing a smile while speaking of prospective bilateral dealings, given his quick introduction to the cut and thrust of recent diplomacy.

The 55-year-old High Commissioner has only one answer to why the thaw in relations is taking place: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"The visit by the Prime Minister has paved the way for improved relations. We can expect more exchange of visits in the coming months," he said.

"I can sense a great deal of warmth from leaders on both sides," he added, with the knowing look of one who has been on the receiving end of icy statements from frosty officials.

The winds of change were felt at the national Kongs Raya celebrations in Johor Baru last Saturday when Malaysian and Singapore ministers took time to make small talk - never mind if it was mostly about the torrential rain, which threatened to wash out the event.

It was a similar scene at lunch the next day, where ministers took the introductions of the earlier evening a step further with the exchange of

more familiar greetings.

Small though the gestures were, they signalled a worthy start to the process of re-introduction between the two nations and their senior leaders.

"Many, on both sides, did not know their counterparts and had not been up close before. But now, they were going out of their way to know each other."

The warmth of relations, however, should not be tested from the mercury reading on the thermometer of the proceedings. Parameswaran agreed that both sides should view the motions of renewed friendship for what they were - the early signs of rapprochement.

He went as far as saying that neither of the two nations should push the envelope of diplomacy. Rather, they should allow the stirrings of amity to take their own course and momentum.

"We cannot push it. We must allow the friendship to take its course."

And the future can only look good for both sides if what Abdullah and Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong have been saying bears fruit. Both have agreed to an acceleration of the mutual visits that began with Goh's trip to Putrajaya.

This saw Goh, and his Cabinet, being invited to the Kongsu Raya function which was followed the next day by Abdullah's engagement in the time-honoured practice of golf diplomacy.

Such was the success of the game on the greens that both leaders immediately expressed an interest in initiating the next round of personal encounters at other fora. "The PM wants more exchanges of visits to cement ties. He has set the tone. The rest will follow," the envoy said.

What can people in both nations expect in the days to come?

"For now, however, we have planned nothing. The priority is getting this process going. What is important is that both Prime Ministers have decided on the approach to resolve sticking points."

Abdullah and Goh have expressed an interest in the legal framework to govern outstanding issues. The approach now, Parameswaran said, was "let's talk and open up the channels of communication".

The new "talking terms", however, should be seen in their perspective as the second phase of efforts initiated by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It was he who had set the ball rolling by ushering Goh to the negotiating table. There was no lack of effort on the part of the former Prime Minister who has a coterie of friends in the republic from his university days there.

Parameswaran was clear on this, saying that both nations had never stopped talking. "It's not that they were not on talking terms before. Malaysia-Singapore relations have generally been good. The difference now is that there is greater exuberance and willingness to talk, to build bridges of friendship," he said.

"You see, the politics was not good before. Leaders were cautious in their approach towards each other. Hence, bilateral relations suffered and problems cropped up."

He felt that the reality of the situation has sunk in on both sides: both are searching for the same answers to problems in bilateral ties.

"There is a new wind of change blowing and both sides are eager to cash in and improve ties. This is not surprising.

"Before, it all stopped at Lamp-post 19 on the Causeway - the border demarcation point in the middle of the Causeway. Leaders were restrained by a stormy past and this inhibited the forging of new relations.

"The Agong made a private visit to Singapore on Saturday. This would not have happened if the atmosphere was not warm and cordial. Lamp-post 19 no longer restricts us. We are ready to go beyond that now."

Does the envoy have a list of priorities now that things are on a more even keel?

"No, you cannot structure these things. You must let the feel-good atmosphere take its course. There are no priorities here. Let us allow this relaxed process to proceed. We will talk about issues and priorities later."

Parameswaran said Singapore officials were "more forthcoming now". Recent advancements should be seen for what they are: a better understanding of the dynamics of the situation and appreciation that both sides share common interests.

Whether this can push the bilateral agenda forward remains to be seen, given the vagaries of time and opportunity in international affairs.