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Better Malaysia-Singapore relations achievable through people activities

Ravi Nambiar

SO close yet so far...that in a nutshell sums up the general public sentiment about people-to-people ties between Johor and Singapore.

Amazing as it may seem, the 2nd Link Bridge Run held two Sundays ago is the only mass participation activity involving the two neighbours.

The annual run, which is into its fourth year and which drew a record 11,000 participants from both sides of the Causeway this year, is the only joint programme officially sanctioned by Johor and Singapore to boost camaraderie and esprit de corps between Malaysians and Singaporeans.

There is virtually nothing else by way of sporting, social, educational or youth activities to bring the two sides together.

It is almost as if the bad blood arising from the seemingly endless diplomatic spats, political discord and intense economic rivalry which has strained Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations in recent years has now crept into the social sphere.

But it need not be that way.

As two sovereign and independent countries, there will always be a divergence of views about each other's actions and motives. This is to be expected. Nothing peculiar about that.

After all, many of the top politicians calling the shots on both sides of the Causeway today still carry the emotional baggage of Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.

As both nations strike out on their own and chart the destiny of their citizens, a battle has unwittingly emerged for national progress, development and economic supremacy.

It is a question of national pride.

And while the politicians, policy makers and bureaucrats slug it out for control and dominance, there is no reason why this should impede the long-standing people-to-people relations between the two neighbours.

Johor and Singapore, after all, are not only linked by geography and history, but also by close family and personal ties.

This, indeed, is the fundamental bedrock of the relationship that binds the two neighbours.

Despite the discord and disdain at the political and economic front, Johor and Singapore have always enjoyed excellent relations on a people-to-people level.

It is for this reason that more needs to be done to bring the two neighbours closer.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad drove home the point in last week's interview with TV3 when he noted that the peoples of Malaysia and Singapore had no quarrel, although both Governments cannot see eye-to-eye on several issues.

Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore Datuk N.Parameswaran also echoed the sentiment recently when he said it was the desire of the Government and the people of Malaysia to raise their relations with the Republic to a higher and closer plane.

He said Malaysia was optimistic of improved ties with the city state despite the hiccup in relations over several outstanding bilateral issues.

"I am confident that with the close friendship that exists between Malaysia and Singapore and with greater understanding and mutual accommodation, we can raise our relations to a higher level.

"For this, Malaysia looks forward to working closely with the Government

and the people of Singapore. We continue to remain optimistic," he said at a National Day reception in Singapore in September.

Certainly, there is room for optimism because opportunities to build lasting bridges of friendship from both sides of the Johor Straits abound.

While the older generation might not see the point or the need because of the bitter experience of separation, the young ones, fortunately, do not carry the same emotional baggage.

Their perception of cross-border ties is not clouded by history or politics and neither do they hold any malice, rancour or enmity towards the neighbours.

This was evident during the 2nd Link Bridge Run, when Malaysians and Singaporeans joined hands and took part in the true spirit of friendship and fellowship.

But let it not just stop there.

Admittedly, there is some element of inertia on the part of the Johor and Singapore Governments to initiate anything big towards this direction. This is understandable considering the current state of bilateral relations.

But it doesn't have to be a government initiated programme. Citizen groups and individuals, too, can launch action plans.