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Bravo to a modern-day conquistador out on another `conquest'

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THE numbers tell it all when it comes to Mexican Ambassador to Malaysia, Alfredo Perez-Bravo. He joined the foreign service at 18, became a head of mission at 33, has been in diplomatic harness for nearly 30 years and yet only turned 47 this year.

And if that is not enough to convince anyone of his exceptional talents, Perez-Bravo is the youngest ambassador ever to be appointed in contemporary Mexican history - an honour he shares with only one other person.

In Malaysia, he was the probably the youngest head of mission on assuming duties after Australian High Commissioner Peter Varghese, 43, who left last year. Today, he continues in that position after Singapore High Commissioner, Ashok Kumar Mirpuri, 42.

With his equable disposition, exceptionally good Latin looks, and finely-honed diplomatic skills, it is no surprise that he is a rising star in the Mexican foreign service.

The list of diplomatic conquests under the belt of this modern-day conquistador is considerable, to say the least.

Where his Spanish ancestors deployed muskets and swords to take over territory for the crown, he wields good sense, astute decision-making and an endless supply of boyish charm to win goodwill for his Government.

His diplomatic arsenal includes his charming wife, Julieta Cervantes Vasquez, who has a list of impressive credits to her name, not the least of which is her ability to put anyone at ease in minutes.

Her beauty-queen looks belie a razor-sharp mind which earned the orthodontist a lecturer's post at the Latin American University in Mexico City. She is currently studying for her Masters in Business Administration at a private college in Kuala Lumpur.

Yet, Perez-Bravo is quick to play down his achievements and that of his wife with the characteristic humility that has made the couple shine in diplomatic circles in Kuala Lumpur.

Despite his reticence when it comes to personal achievement, little nuggets of information can be gleaned of his extraordinary rise through the ranks.

For instance, he joined the Foreign Ministry immediately after high school and attended classes at the National Autonomous University of Mexico where he sometimes corrected his professors on current issues or updated them on details.

"They did not like it. I was very, very lucky (to be working in the Foreign Ministry at that time). Immediately after university, I took the examination to become a diplomat and managed to pass," he said, adding that an average of 1,000 graduates usually competed for a mere five to 10 jobs in the foreign service.

Asked about his meteoric rise in the foreign service, he says it incurred the wrath of many of his contemporaries "who were very angry with my appointment".

Plaudits, however, mean little to the father of two teenage boys whose singular interest since assuming duties in late 2001 has been in taking MalaysiaMexico ties to a new dimension. And it has been a success story all the way.

Again one only has to look to the numbers to understand the situation. Trade between the two countries stood at about RM8 billion (US\$2 billion)

and overwhelmingly in Malaysia's favour with the country exporting a range of items including plastics, computer equipment, rubber gloves and footwear.

Malaysia imports plastics, automobile and computer parts and electronic products from Mexico.

The value of bilateral trade which only stood at RM750 million in 1996 speaks volumes of the special relationship between the two nations which Perez-Bravo sees as leaders in their respective regions.

"It is only right that our two countries strengthen our trade and people-to-people relationship as Mexico is Malaysia's principal trading partner in Latin America, while Malaysia is Mexico's main trading partner in Southeast Asia," he said in a recent 90-minute interview at his sprawling Taman Titiwangsa home.

There may be bigger things in store for the two nations. Petronas is thinking of tying up with players in the Mexican automotive industry while Cemex, a leading Mexican cement manufacturer, is thinking of investing in Malaysia.

Mexico, according to Perez-Bravo, sees Malaysia as a platform for trade with Southeast Asia given its impressive track record. Not bad for a country that few know about in Mexico.

The couple had to point out Malaysia on the map of the world to relatives and friends who were apprehensive about their move.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is better known in Mexico than Malaysia. There is a parallel to that in Malaysia with Mexican singer/actress Thalia and "Roslinda", the soap opera in which she stars, being better known than anything else in Mexico.

Perez-Bravo narrates an incident where he was asked by a Malaysian taxi driver if Mexico was part of the United States while another person remarked that Mexico was a neighbour of Argentina which is actually a 10-hour flight to the south.

"There are some sectors that we can co-operate in. Tourism is one such area. We should look at encouraging the tourist trade between the two countries. Malaysia is a beautiful country and one of the best kept secret in the world."

Perez-Bravo cannot stop talking when it comes to Dr Mahathir with every second word being superlative in nature. A little-known secret is that he was given a choice of three countries in the region (he cites diplomatic privilege in not disclosing the names of the countries), but chose Malaysia "as I wanted to meet Dr Mahathir".

It is a natural attraction and admiration that draws the ambassador to the Prime Minister who he ranks right at the top with former Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme who was later assassinated.

"The most important feature of his leadership is the results achieved by his administration because he had the big picture in mind. He is bigger than the country.

"One might say that some people may have had greater humanity and were very charismatic, but they are nothing if they did not have an effect on the people."

Dr Mahathir, he says, is unique and "we may never find another man like him in this country or anywhere else".

The erudite Perez-Bravo is well-armed with intellectual and academic credentials. Besides having been a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the other hats he has worn include being adviser to the Mexican Foreign Minister and Mexican representative at the 13th Non-Aligned Movement summit.

He has also been itinerant ambassador to Africa with accreditation to 39 countries, ambassador to Algeria and Panama (concurrently to Surinam and

Guyana) and Mexican representative to the 17-strong Caribbean Community.

Perez-Bravo tells a story to explain how his family members have adapted to life in Kuala Lumpur. Just before his transfer here, his second son, 13, protested that he did not want to come to Malaysia.

"Nicolas came to me and said he would try it out for just two years. If he did not like it, he would like to return to Mexico. After just six months here, he told me one day to forget about the promise. He wanted to know if we could make it four years."

One of the attractions for the family is the local food which Julieta, especially, finds fascinating.

"I have been eating almost every meal at the Bombay Palace this week. The food is superb and just as spicy as Mexican cuisine," says the former public relations and international promotion director for TANE Orfebres, a company dealing in the manufacture of silver and gold jewellery.

Perez-Bravo admits that he tries not to think of his next posting, adding that family's links with the country were growing by the day.

"A former diplomat told me that you cry when you come to Malaysia and that you cry when you return. We expect this may be true when our time comes to leave."

The Mexican Foreign Ministry may, therefore, find it difficult to uproot the Perez-Bravo family if the experience it had with its last ambassador in Malaysia, Ricardo Villaneuva, is anything to go by. "They literally had to carry him away. He was here for six years and loved every minute of it," said Perez-Bravo, flashing a smile that held promise of a similar