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Focus on religious education in Malaysia

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was the focus of an article in The Straits Times of Singapore on Tuesday on the prospective state of religious education in the country.

Its correspondent in Kuala Lumpur, Brendan Pereira, predicted that the Prime Minister would deliver a speech "that could have consequences for Malaysia and the region long after his retirement in October".

He was referring to the speech Dr Mahathir is expected to make before a gathering of Umno leaders today at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The Straits Times felt that Dr Mahathir would opt for the Johor system of religious education which has received the thumbs up from most quarters nationwide.

This, the newspaper opined, was due to almost a century of quality religious education in the southern state which, coincidentally, is a bastion of support for Umno, the main partner in the Barisan Nasional.

Pereira referred to plus points behind the Johor brand of religious education that extended to even the mode of dressing, with distinctly Malay attire like songkok for boys to shore up his argument that it was the preferred system within Umno.

"There is no place in this system for robes or skull caps or the Middle-Eastern influences prevalent in religious schools in other parts of the country," the story added.

The Straits Times also looked at the question of whether English should be used to teach Chinese in Singapore with the pros and cons highlighted for the reader.

The debate continued to simmer, with some harking back to history when they learnt Chinese using English to bolster the argument for a continuation of the same.

Others, the newspaper hastened to state, had derogatively termed the system a ching chong style, which may result in young students ending up with a substandard form of the language.

On other fronts, M. Nirmala reported that a new link had been set up on the Singapore Information, Communications and the Arts (Mita) Ministry website to offer "a fuller picture" on bilateral ties between Singapore and Malaysia.

The website will contain speeches and letters and copies of articles on bilateral issues, including the water talks and the Pulau Batu Puteh issue, as well as offer answers to Frequently Asked Questions, such as: "Why Singapore is standing so firm on the water issue instead of paying a little more for the sake of good bilateral relations."

Meanwhile, a letter to The Straits Times probably put the issue of the tenuous ties between Malaysia and Singapore in its proper perspective.

Chandrashekar Gupta, in his missive, said he was not convinced of the possibility of war in the future as "decisions are not hostage to 'popular dynamics' but are made by hard-nosed realists.

"...Singapore is no Israel. Here neither ethnic considerations nor religious passions dictate the course of national decisions."