

27/07/2003

There's a lot more to Malaysia-Singapore ties than just water

K.T. Tan

THE Malaysia-Singapore water advertisements over the last week certainly had Malaysians abuzz. It was not that Malaysians needed convincing. We are so close to Singapore and have numerous encounters with their officials - immigration, Customs, police and for those in business, their other authorities.

Malaysians find it very hard to reconcile the difference in attitude between Singapore officialdom's hard-nosed, calculative, ruthless efficiency which leaves no room for normal courtesies, and the Singapore people's casual friendliness, almost like we are one people.

Maybe that's why we look at Singaporeans as our friends and, yet, are wary and reticent when dealing with their officials.

The advertisements placed by the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) confirmed our views that, as per norm, Singapore officialdom adopted the same cold, calculative, ruthless, legalistic and we-must-get-the-better-deal approach in negotiations over the water issue.

The numbers show clearly Malaysia is at the losing end and that Singapore not only benefits from us, but also from its citizens by charging them high rates for the water they buy from Malaysia at three sen per 1,000 gallons.

Why does the Singapore Government say it is puzzled that Malaysia took the advertisements. They should not be puzzled. The NEAC advertisements and booklet, which the Singapore High Commission snapped up, made it very clear that the advertisements were in response to Singapore's booklet issued widely to foreign missions and posted on various official websites in March.

The Singapore media predictably responded with stereotype rejoinders. Three articles in their true-to-form The Straits Times newspaper, sum up Singapore officialdom's views.

Water advertisements a surreal swash-buckling by Chua Lee Hong on July 16, Abang, Adik will simply not play little brother by Janadas Devan and Emotions and the politics of envy by Mafoot Simon.

In essence, the articles say Malaysia is using the advertisements to whip up nationalism; that Malaysia wants to be a big brother in relations with Singapore, and that Malaysia is envious of Singapore's success.

It is no surprise that the media reacted in such a manner. Many of their writers are linked to the Singapore Government. An Australian publication reported recently that many writers were previously with the republic's intelligence gathering units.

One or two may be seeking to prove their loyalty after their kin were unceremoniously removed from high office.

But let's not get emotional like these writers. The so-called abang adik theory frequently used by Singapore politicians and journalists in describing the alleged Malaysian attitude, and sometimes Indonesia's, has been used previously to galvanise support from the Singapore grassroots.

If Malaysia or any other country in the region did nurture such belief, then it would have been dispelled long ago because Singapore has shown it cares two hoots about these so-called abang. The facts tell a different story.

When the then powerful President Suharto, in 1968, appealed to Singapore not to hang two Indonesian paratroopers found guilty of sabotage, Singapore authorities stood their ground and hanged the two.

When in the late 1980s, Singapore arrested and whipped illegal Thai workers, they ignored a plea by the Thai Government to send the workers back without whipping them.

In the early 1990s, when a Filipino maid was sentenced to hang for murder, Singapore disregarded an emotional appeal by then President Fidel Ramos and hanged her.

In their dealings with Malaysia, they have never shown that there is an abang adik relationship.

If Singapore's neighbours and partners in Asean still nurture thoughts of an abang adik relationship, there must be something wrong with them.

When teenage student Michael Fay of the United States went on an adolescent spree of graffiti spraying and vandalism, he was ordered to be given six strokes of the cane.

But then US President Bill Clinton intervened and asked Singapore to reduce the sentence. Fay was given four strokes instead and went home to the US soon after.

Singapore authorities banned chewing gum after some commuters stuck gum on doors of trains on the MRT, creating delays. But, when negotiating for a Free Trade Agreement with the United States, American officials insisted the ban be lifted. Singapore duly complied.

Singapore has very jealously guarded its sovereignty, a point it makes very clear when dealing with its Asian neighbours.

But despite polls showing that the majority of Singaporeans were against the Iraq war, Singapore, at the urging of the US, became a member of the coalition of the willing.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude where the abang adik relationship really is. Malaysia, on the other hand, works hand-in-glove with the United States and other countries for the common universal good and speaks its mind and stands by its principles when it has to.

The abang adik analogy is frequently used to reinforce a siege mentality, but this mind-set is wrong because Singapore's neighbours are not hostile, and further, Singapore is the most well-armed country in this region.

Singapore is an urbane, sophisticated, efficient, confident and successful city state. Its neighbours are rural and not as successful.

Maybe, that's why there is this perception among its neighbours that urbane, sophisticated Singapore officialdom does not know how to deal with and understand them.

But does that mean, as one Singapore writer said, that Malaysia is envious of Singapore? Certainly, the NEAC advertisements were not emotional. They merely stated the facts.

And certainly, as a close neighbour and friend, Singapore is aware that Malaysia's stated policy has been prosper thy neighbour.

Countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and our other neighbours can attest to how Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Government have always been in the forefront, promoting intra-Asean investments, infrastructure, Asian bonds, an East Asian Economic Caucus and other measures to improve Asia's collective lot.

We do want Singapore to be prosperous. When it was badly hit by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic, we gave our fullest co-operation to ensure that it did not suffer too much.

Malaysia would certainly be pleased if Singapore's struggling economy recovers because it can only benefit both countries.

It cannot be in Malaysia's interests to envy and wish ill upon Singapore because we are linked closely - geographically, people to people, and, economically.

The food and water Singapore gets are either from Malaysia or routed

through Malaysia from Thailand; Singapore's industries depend heavily on Malaysian labour; Malaysians who work in the republic repatriate money to Malaysia and Singaporeans are one of the biggest contributors to the Malaysian tourism industry and foreign direct investment (FDI).

As seen in the past, Singapore is fully aware of this because when diplomatic tiffs occur, it always urges its people not to visit Malaysia.

Malaysians have uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins and friends in Singapore and vice-versa, and many more of the present generation are married to each other. This does not mean there is an abang adik relationship, but it is a special relationship which neither country shares with any other.

Therefore, much as writers and officials in Singapore want to create the impression that Malaysia wants to be an abang, is emotional, envious and irrational, the facts do speak for themselves. Just like the NEAC water advertisements. And as the last NEAC advertisement implied, let's continue to be friends, but be fair.