

Malaysia, a bundle of foreign affairs bungles
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COMMENT During a recent conference in Tunisia, many friends from all over the world who espouse principles of social justice sat around a table discussing issues ranging from universal equality for employment to the Israeli-Palestine situation.

I felt it crucial that I highlight the plight of my party chairperson Karpal Singh's recent conviction that is nothing less than a clear case of "persecution by prosecution" masterminded by the current regime in Malaysia.

Among the many who took a particular interest in our nation was the Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM). No, they are not a militia group, but a leftist party whose leader Paul Berenger heads the parliamentary opposition block, who "militates for the Mauritian people".

As Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was due to visit Mauritius on a trade and commerce mission (which was cancelled due to the MH370 crisis), and also, controversially, as the chief guest of the Mauritian independence celebrations, my conversations with the MMM deepened.

I was told that as soon as the announcement of Najib reached the Mauritian media, the ire of the masses was drawn. This is an excerpt from a Mauritian French language report by a popular online news portal:

"The government doesn't give too much regard to quality when it comes to foreign leaders that it invites. As can be seen, Sassou Nguesso from Congo in 2011, Gabon's Ali Bongo Ondimba last October, soon Maritius will host another foreign visitor with a poor record of democracy.

"This is Najib Razak, PM of Malaysia, who will pay a state visit on March 11 to 13 as a guest of honour at our National Independence celebration."

Concerns about Najib outlined

The report unreservedly lists out the concerns levelled against Najib - of gerrymandering, political oppression of opposition, corruption and even cites the Scorpene scandal. But the most stinging comment comes at the end with:

"Nonetheless, we still wish the Malaysian guest has a pleasant stay and that the Mauritian host fails to adopt his methods."

MMM also took a principled stand that it does the island city state no good to invite the head of a regime which by all counts had been found to baffle the very tenets of democracy by indulging in gerrymandering prior to the last general election, thereby stumping the will of the people.

Vijay Makhan, a former commissioner of the African Union, former foreign secretary of Mauritius and now member of the executive of the MMM and its foreign affairs spokesperson said in a statement:

"In Mauritius the MMM opposition, without in any way interfering in the internal political affairs of a sovereign and friendly state, has decried the findings against Karpal Singh as well as against the leader of the opposition Anwar Ibrahim."

Salt added to wound

All this took place as the scheduled visit was building up, which for those familiar with the diplomatic relationship between Malaysia and Mauritius, would describe as "loaded with tension".

A longstanding issue on the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Mauritius was also brought to the fore, with foreign affairs commentators as well as the Mauritian opposition slamming the BN government for not maintaining a High Commission in Mauritius when Mauritius does in Kuala Lumpur.

"It's a one sided, unreciprocated, poor excuse of a bilateral relationship," said a Mauritian commentator on a French language online portal.

The already strained situation was thrown into a new level of complexity, when a federal minister was sent to Mauritius in place of Najib.

The minister was not able to reach a consensus with the Mauritian High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur on the matter of the Malaysian stand on Mauritius' ambitions of playing a more significant role in Asean.

The talks ended abruptly, with the Mauritian High Commissioner walking out in anger and displeasure.

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