

**COMMENT | By meeting Najib, S'pore minister dishonours M'sians**

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COMMENT | When Singapore's foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan visited Malaysia for three days of intensive talks last week, he met an impressive array of leaders, including the prime minister, royalty, other top government ministers and opposition figures.

But he also did a very puzzling thing - he conferred with a convicted felon who was responsible for the greatest theft ever in Malaysia and what is still considered to be the largest kleptocratic theft of government money ever. We are, of course, talking about former prime minister Najib Abdul Razak and self-styled national development company 1MDB.

Singapore should be well aware of the 1MDB scandal because it figured very highly as a place from which much of money laundering from 1MDB occurred. In fact, Singapore was the first country to charge and jail bank officials for offences committed in relation to 1MDB.

In the concluding remarks of my book, '1MDB The Scandal that Brought Down a Government' published in August 2018, I wrote: "All the money misappropriated (from 1MDB) moved at some stage into bank accounts in Singapore. The Good Star account, the Blackstone account (into which the Aabar-BVI misappropriation was transferred), and the Tanore Finance account were all in Singapore and money was disbursed elsewhere from these accounts.

"In fact, Jho Low's ownership record for Good Star was a mere bearer share - anyone holding that share will be the owner of the account which had over US\$1 billion in funds! Not just in Singapore but among a lot of the banks and jurisdictions, very few questions were asked about funds moving in and out."

The above was based on a comprehensive US Department of Justice (DOJ) filing in July 2017 for recoveries of assets bought with stolen 1MDB money. The department estimated the theft at US\$4.507 billion then.

Here is another excerpt from the book: "Jho Low, who is very close to Najib's family, emerges as the mastermind and there is collusion with key officials at 1MDB, especially Shahrol Helmi, once CEO of 1MDB, former executive director Casey Tang and general counsel Jasmine Loo. They misled the 1MDB board and in some instances directly disobeyed board instructions.

“Also, such a crime could not be perpetrated without the knowledge of prime minister Najib who under Section 117 of 1MDB’s memorandum and articles of association had to be informed of all major matters at 1MDB. Najib was also finance minister, and therefore the highest officer of Minister of Finance Inc which owned all of 1MDB. He was also chairman of the advisory board.”

Just one more excerpt: “1MDB is a deliberate scheme to steal billions from Malaysia. At the end of the day, all evidence points to 1MDB being deliberately set up and manipulated to make tens of billions of ringgit (money lost one way or another can amount to as much as RM40 billion or more) with complicity from the very top.

“If there was no such complicity, 1MDB’s losses would not have happened. It is the largest such theft in the world and is a shameless and audacious transfer of bond proceeds out of 1MDB and into the hands of criminal conspirators on top of other misdeeds earlier such as bond mispricing and overpayment for assets.”

### **Political expediency**

Surely Singapore, where the branches of banks which transferred these funds were located, should know enough about the shenanigans at 1MDB. But still, political expediency takes precedence with what many see as the impending

ascendency of Najib, in one way or another, to a position of power in the new Malaysian configuration.

By honouring a convicted felon with such a meeting, who is facing numerous other charges related to 1MDB, Singapore's foreign minister dishonours all Malaysians who have suffered much from the 1MDB scandal and face an ongoing political crisis and upheaval which may see the return of officials who are close to Najib to the top echelons of political leadership after the next general election.

Singapore should have been much more circumspect about the issue and carefully avoided anything which might be misconstrued as interfering in the affairs of another sovereign country. No foreign minister meets with a convicted criminal of a neighbouring country with which there are deep, long links of history, friendship, family ties, animosity even, and strong mutual dependency.

At this point in the conflict which we all face and grapple with as Malaysians who have never been so divided before, it was rather callous for the top Singapore foreign affairs official to meet the person largely responsible for it all, Najib Razak, and give him some form of legitimacy.

It would have been far more polite and politically correct under the circumstances to stay out of this crucial internal fray and not honour in any way a

convicted felon who has become a major divisive figure in the country and regularly misuses social media to paint a better, tainted picture of himself.

A well-respected judge has written an 800-page watertight justification for Najib's conviction, sentencing him to 12 years in jail and RM210 million in fines. This judge is now facing an orchestrated attempt to defame him and, weirdly, an investigation for corruption as a result of unsubstantiated allegations by a discredited blogger.

The Court of Appeal has upheld this conviction in no uncertain terms and Najib will exhaust all his legal avenues probably in August when the Federal Court hears his appeal. As this goes on, there is swirling talk of a royal pardon being lined up for Najib, talk which was fuelled by a reception that the king gave where Najib was present.

Meanwhile, Najib is facing a slew of other cases, involving billions of ringgit, mainly for 1MDB-related charges, which he is going to find hard to resist and defend successfully. The evidence against him appears solid.

The decision by the Singapore foreign minister to meet Najib, therefore, is injudicious, inappropriate, insensitive, inconsiderate, insulting, indifferent, interfering and insolent to say the least.

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