

Some unfinished tasks for Abdullah
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In the wake of the March 8 political earthquake, a journalist from Radio Singapore International expressed to me his shock at the scale of the Opposition wins at the state and national levels. He was also particularly concerned about the future of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"A moderate, well-mannered and amicable Malaysian leader like Abdullah will always be treasured by Singaporeans from all walks of life. He would be sorely missed if forced out of office," he said.

lee kuan yewHe has a point. Granted, there are many remaining issues and disputes between the two countries, and solutions to them often become unnecessarily complicated because of the racist nature of BN politics as well as Lee Kuan Yew's habit to use Malaysia as a bogeyman. Be so as it may, Abdullah has indeed been consistently reconciliatory and measured in his dealings with the island state.

For instance, although the BN government played tough in early 2006 and unilaterally revived the construction of the controversial crooked bridge over Selat Tebrau, the project was brought to an abrupt halt due to serious legal reasons a few months after the announcement. Despite the enormous pressure from within Umno, not to mention Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was (and still is) constantly baying for blood, Abdullah stood his ground. Thankfully, rational prevailed at the end.

Bitter bill to swallow

Regrettably, Abdullah's goodwill was not quite reciprocated by Singapore perhaps because the PAP government believed it was Malaysia which had been foolhardy in the first place.

Which was true. But again, can one imagine what would have happened had the egoistic and recalcitrant Mahathir remained at the helm? The project would in all likelihood go ahead at all costs and the future generations of Malaysians would be forced to swallow the bitter bill. Pointless tussles would still flare up from time to time.

It is certainly not easy for Singapore to negotiate with Malaysia because of Umno's treacherous seas of racist politics. Therefore, Lee's failure to fully appreciate Abdullah's effort in repairing the bilateral relations – severely damaged during Mahathir's era – is still puzzling to me. In late 2006, Lee in his usual provocative manner remarked Chinese Malaysians were marginalized, which again touched on Umno's raw nerve and put the MCA in a dilemma.

mahathir khir toyo kmu forum 010408 06Lee was delighted at the irrational reactions from across the strait, but it was gracious of Abdullah to not respond in kind. I am not suggesting what Lee said was not valid. It certainly was. But Abdullah was pragmatic enough to avoid being dragged into a potentially messy and futile tit-for-tat with the octogenarian Minister Mentor.

Some Chinese Malaysians might have felt consoled by Lee's "righteous" voice, but any

drastic response on the part of Abdullah would not have done either country any good and it would be the ordinary businesspeople, visitors and Malaysians working in Singapore who would have to bear the brunt.

On the whole, Malaysia-Singapore relations have become healthier and normal, although still not always cordial. But Malaysian politics are now in a state of flux, causing naturally considerable concern to the island state that is a great deal more dependent on regional stability.

Singapore aside, vast improvement has also been made in Malaysia's bilateral ties with the United States and Australia under Abdullah, although one still cannot excuse the prime minister of making use of the official ties to benefit himself and his family Down Under.

The same however cannot be said of Abdullah's records as chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

Early this year, Nato forces conducted large-scale aerial strikes and land fighting in Afghanistan to counter Taliban insurgency. Much of the military campaign was carried out without concrete intelligence data on land areas, and lacked a co-ordination with the authorities in Kabul. It was not a surprise that the reckless action only resulted in massive civilian casualties.

Ali Khan, once a resident legal scholar with the OIC, calls Nato's reckless and wanton behavior as nothing but "genocide"

Do useful things at home

But it is the ineptness of the OIC over the blatant violations of human rights in Afghanistan that is the most appalling, which again plays into the hands of the Bush propagandists that the Ummah has failed Afghanistan (and also Iraq) much more than the invaders.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah pc 060607 happyWhy didn't Abdullah say something? Well, the inertia of our prime minister is so great that he most probably would not have wanted to wear such a big hat at all if not because his megalomaniac predecessor had secured the job for him. He also lacks all the essential ingredients to be a world leader, while his words often do not carry weight. Abdullah must be glad that the OIC chairmanship was finally passed on to Senegal, the ceremony of which he did not even bother to attend because of the electoral disaster at home.

Now that the end of the Abdullah premiership is nigh, the prime minister should forget about any international vainglories, cut down his excessive overseas trips, and use the little time that he has to do a few things on the domestic front.

He must salvage his reputation by proving to the public that he will no longer be hamstrung by insidious Umno cronyism, and end the bitter in-fighting not just in the party but in the BN as a whole. Get the house in order before he vacates his seat.

Next, Abdullah should do his utmost to restore independence to our judiciary, and clean up money politics in his own ranks. He must be bold enough to overcome the pressure from the police and set up the long overdue Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission, and introduce tougher laws to root out corruption.

Also, with Dr. Mahathir challenging the government to set up a royal commission on his alleged misconduct, Abdullah should waver no more but do just that, failing which his image as a weakling will be reinforced to his own detriment.

That way, even if Abdullah might not be accorded a Bapa of anything, he would at least be remembered for mending the broken rails before the next train approached.

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