

Lee: I don't mean to meddle

NSF- 3/10/2006

KUALA LUMPUR: Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has apologised to the Prime Minister over his remarks that the Chinese had been systematically marginalised in Malaysia.

He told Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that he had no intention of meddling in Malaysian politics.

Lee said: "I am sorry that what I said has caused you a great deal of discomfort. After a decade of troubled relations with your predecessor, it is the last thing I wanted."

But he appeared to be steadfast in what he had earlier said, repeating some of the very comments that had infuriated Malaysians.

This is not the first time he has apologised for his remarks. In March 1997, Lee apologised to the Malaysian Government following an official protest over his remarks in a court affidavit that Johor Baru was "notorious for shootings, muggings and carjackings".

In his letter to Abdullah (right) dated Sept 29, Lee said he made the remarks during a "free-flowing dialogue session" at a meeting attended mostly by foreign delegates on Sept 15.

A copy of the letter was faxed

to the Press by the Singapore High Commission late last night, together with statements from Malaysian leaders, culled from the Malaysian media over the years, about Singapore Malays being marginalised.

Lee was replying to Abdullah's letter seeking clarification about his comments that Malaysian Chinese were marginalised and compliant.

Abdullah had said Lee's remarks were not welcomed.

Lee told Abdullah that he was explaining to Westerners who wanted to see a stronger opposition in Singapore why the republic needed a strong-majority Government and not a weak coalition.

He pointed out that there were occasions when Umno leaders had publicly warned Malaysian Malays that if they ever lost power, they risked the same fate as Malays in Singapore, "whom they alleged are marginalised and discriminated against".

He said he had not said anything more than what he had said before, adding that he had no power to influence Malaysia's politics or to incite the feelings of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Minister Mentor Singapore

29 September 2006

Dear Prime Minister,

Thank you for your letter of 25 September 2006.

I made the remarks in a free-flowing dialogue session with former US Secretary of Treasury Larry Summers before many foreign delegates attending the IMF/World Bank meeting. To put what Reuters reported into context, I set out the transcript of the relevant passage:

"Let me sum it up nicely, why you must have a government in Singapore which is really firm, stout-hearted, subtle and resolute. My neighbours both have problems with their Chinese. They are successful, they are hardworking and, therefore, they are systematically marginalized, even in education. There are quotas to prevent you. So, you've got to make money to go abroad or go to one of the private universities which are being set up. And they want Singapore, to put it simply, to be like their Chinese, compliant. So, every time, we say "No" to some scheme to knock down the Causeway and build the bridge, he says, "Oh, you are not cooperative, you are only thinking of yourself". For no rhyme or reason, we knock down a causeway nearly 100 years old, which served us well.

He wants to build a bridge because it looks pretty and he says ships will sail and his containers can move from the East Coast to the West Coast via this. But we saw no... So, we said, "All right, if you give us commensurate benefits, we'll agree". But you need a government who will be able to, not only have the gumption, but the skill to say, 'No' in a very quiet, polite way that doesn't provoke them into doing something silly."

On the bridge and the half bridge to remove the Causeway, you make the position of your government clear that Malaysia respects legally binding agreement and acts in accordance with international law. This made unnecessary a reference to ITLOS and the International Court of Justice that would otherwise have been unavoidable. This respect for the law is the basis for sound long term relations between us.

I was explaining to a liberal audience of westerners who wanted to see a stronger opposition in Singapore why Singapore needs a strong majority government, not a weak coalition that will hamper us in defending our national interests.

Singapore needs a strong government to maintain good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia, and to interact with Indonesian and Malaysian politicians who consider Singapore to be Chinese, and expect Singapore to be 'sensitive' and comply with their requests.

On numerous occasions, Umno leaders, including Dr Mahathir and many others, have publicly warned Malaysian Malays that if they ever lose power, they risk the same fate as Malays in Singapore, whom they allege are marginalised and discriminated against (see Annex). And from time to time when Malaysian politicians attack Singapore fiercely over some bilateral issue, some of them tell us privately that we should just accept this as part of Malaysian politics and not react to these attacks.

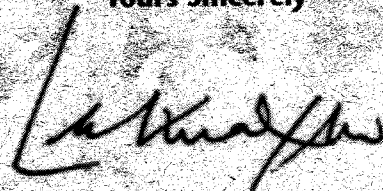
Singapore understands the reality of Malaysian politics. We have never protested at these attacks on our multi-racial system or our policies except to clarify our own position when necessary. But we have to explain to our people the root cause of these difficulties in our bilateral relations. Otherwise Singaporeans will believe that their own government is doing wrong, either to our own people or to Malaysia. As for the international audience, with so many foreign embassy staff and foreign correspondents reporting on Singapore and Malaysia plus tens of thousands of expatriate businessmen working in our two countries, these people will come to their own judgement of the true position regardless of what I say.

I have not said anything more than what I have said many times before. In fact I have said less than what I had written in my memoirs published in 1998.

I have no intention to meddle in your politics. Indeed I do not have the power to influence Malaysia's politics or to incite the feelings of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Since you took over as Prime Minister in November 2003, relations between our two countries have much improved. Singaporeans and, I believe, Malaysians too, appreciate this. I am sorry that what I said has caused you a great deal of discomfort. After a decade of troubled relations with your predecessor, it is the last thing I wanted.

Yours Sincerely



PS: The fact that you have written to me is now well publicised. As I have been asked about my reply, I will have to release my letter to the media after you have received it.