The Scenic Bridge Saga: A well-considered move

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PUTRAJAYA: The tone was respectful and the language polite, but the Government yesterday demolished the notion that the scrapping of the scenic bridge was not well thought out. In pulling the plug on the over-a-decade-old issue, the Government had, in fact, thoroughly weighed four options before making a collective political decision in the national interest.

In a statement yesterday, Ministry of Foreign Affairs ambassador-at-large Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak said Malaysia had tried its best to realise the bridge project. Singapore, however, had linked approval for the bridge to a "balance of mutual benefits" which included the sale of sand and the right to use Malaysian airspace.

Ahmad Fuzi revealed that Malaysia even offered the possibility of considering bearing the entire cost of constructing a full bridge in return for Singapore's agreement without linking it to other issues.

He said one of the four options crafted by the Malaysian delegation to the talks was a broad political understanding (BPU) to secure a full straight bridge. The BPU would provide the basis for detailed technical and legal negotiations, including a consideration of Singapore's request that Malaysia lift the 1997 ban on export of sand and the reinstatement of the right to use Malaysia's airspace as among the trade-offs.

"As a strong Government with more than a two-thirds majority in Parliament, the Government could have gone ahead with the BPU and subsequently persuaded Malaysians to accept the compromise and enjoy a new full straight bridge after its completion."

The Government also quashed a second option, which was to proceed with the scenic bridge and join it to the Singapore part of the Causeway.

This option could have left Malaysia with a huge problem as it would still need to obtain Singapore's approval for the relocation of its Public Utilities Board water pipelines (in the context of the 1961 and 1962 Water Agreements and the 1965 Separation Agreement). Singapore had written to say that "international facilities such as the Causeway" could not be demolished without its approval.

The Attorney-General's Chambers, in confirming Singapore's interpretation of the 1961 and 1962 Johor-Singapore Water Agreements, said "Malaysia is required to obtain prior approval from the PUB in relation to the alteration of the water pipelines necessitated by the construction of a bridge, whether it is a full straight bridge or a scenic bridge (half bridge)."

Ahmad Fuzi said Singapore could even stop KTMB from using the Singaporean part of the Causeway if Malaysia demolished its part of the Causeway unilaterally. If KTMB trains did not go into Singapore for six months, KTMB's land on the island could revert to Singapore under Section 4 of the Singapore Railway Transfer Ordinance (Chapter 320).

The third option was to unilaterally build a half bridge that could eventually be linked to become a full scenic bridge. However, there was no guarantee Singapore would agree to build a bridge on its side without asking for sand and airspace usage. The end result could be a "hanging

bridge" which would invite ridicule and affect the image of Malaysia.

The fourth option was to scrap the bridge. Now, Malaysia need not have to consider lifting the ban on the export of sand (imposed on Jan 15, 1997) and granting Singapore the use of Johor's airspace (the rights were withdrawn on Sept 16, 1998).

Taking the fourth option would prevent the two countries from being embroiled in endless political bickering and legal disputes, he said.

Ahmad Fuzi said: "Malaysia did not really lose even if it did not get the bridge. Singapore too did not look at Malaysia's decision in terms of victory or defeat. After all, Singapore did not get what it wanted in respect of sand and airspace."

'What Dr Mahathir Said'

FORMER Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government should have gone ahead with the construction of a bridge unilaterally, regardless of any threat of legal action by Singapore.

By not doing so, he charged, the Government had conceded defeat without a fight.

On April 15, in saying the bridge project should have gone ahead, Dr Mahathir added: "Let me say it frankly that I do not agree with the Government's view that the people do not want the crooked bridge."

He had said this after visiting the site of the Southern Integrated Gateway project in Johor.

Dr Mahathir said Singapore had opposed the bridge from the start, which was why just before he retired in 2003, he had proposed the building of a "crooked bridge" to replace half of the Causeway.

He maintained that despite Singapore's threats of legal action, Malaysia should have proceeded with building a bridge on its side of the Tebrau Strait.

"We should have taken the issue to the International Court, just as we did with Pulau Sipadan-Ligitan, which we eventually won. But in the case of Singapore, we have conceded defeat without putting up a fight."

He said fears of a face-off with Singapore because of the relocation of pipes carrying water from Johor to Singapore were unfounded.

"Under the Separation Agreement, Malaysia can move the water pipes by giving Singapore six months' notice, after which Singapore would have to comply at its own expense.

"This has already been done with Singapore's Public Utility Board moving some of the water pipes on land near the Causeway to facilitate work on the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex."

Dr Mahathir also claimed that former Singapore premier, Goh Chok Tong had written to him saying that "if we wanted to build a bridge on our side, he would respect it even if it was not ideal to him. No conditions imposed".

Dr Mahathir said it was because the Government had negotiated with Singapore, instead of proceeding to unilaterally build the bridge, that the island republic had come up with unreasonable demands such as asking that sand be sold to it and that Singaporean military aircraft be allowed to use Johor airspace.

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