

The Scenic Bridge: 'Fuji's just rambling...'

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<mailto:news@nst.com.my> KUALA LUMPUR: No one is being spared Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's venom these days — not even Tan Sri Fuzi Abdul Razak, the seasoned, mild-mannered and respected diplomat.

In the latest instalment of his attack on the Government for scrapping the plan to build the bridge to replace the Causeway, the former prime minister took issue with Fuzi's comprehensive defence of that decision on April 25.

He called the explanation rambling and unconvincing. convincing at all.

"Tan Sri Fuzi's rambling explanation about the bridge serves only to convince that the Government's priority and intention is to sell sand to Singapore. If it is not allowed to do so, then Malaysia will not get its bridge," said Dr Mahathir in a 16-point statement.

The ambassador-at-large had said that scrapping the bridge was the best option given the strong opposition to Malaysia selling sand to the republic and allowing the use of Malaysian airspace by Singapore's air force.

The first option was to proceed with negotiations to reach a deal with mutual benefits.

Based on Singapore's immediate needs, Fuzi said, Malaysia would have had to lift the ban on the export of sand and reinstate the use of Malaysian airspace.

But public opinion in Malaysia indicated these concessions were seen as giving away too much in exchange for a new bridge.

The second option was to proceed with a scenic half-bridge within Malaysia, that would join the Singapore's half part of the 80-year-old Causeway. But this required getting consulting Singapore's to get its approval to relocate water pipelines, which could lead to a request for a balance of benefits.

Option three was to unilaterally build a half-bridge that could eventually be linked to become a full scenic bridge with Singapore. But this would have resulted in endless political bickering and legal wrangle.

The fourth option — not to proceed with a new bridge — was the Government's best choice after much deliberation.

Tun Dr Mahathir said that his reading of the Wayleave Agreement signed between both countries showed that there was no specific provision for Singapore's approval before relocating the Public Utilities Board water pipelines.

He noted that there had been many alterations to the Causeway and pipelines in the past without any objection from Singapore or Malaysia.

Tun He also Dr Mahathir called attention to a letter he received from former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stating that he had no objections if Malaysia intended to replace its side of the Causeway with a bridge.

“Thus a unilateral decision became bilateral when Singapore acceded and accepted. Any change must similarly be agreed to by both sides,” he said.

In his statement, Fuzi had put Goh’s statement in its proper context. He noted that Goh had written a subsequent letter to withdraw that concession after Dr Mahathir signalled intention to call off talks on the package of issues and concentrate on settling the niggling question of water supply.

Goh wrote: “With the termination of the package negotiations, the underlying basis for the statements in the letter of 11 April 11, 2002 no longer exists.”

Dr Mahathir said that when Singapore stated that it wanted sand and airspace, it was adding conditions to what had been decided by him and Goh.

Malaysia should have rejected the new conditions. He argued that by aborting the plan to build a bridge plan, Malaysia had tacitly agreed to Singapore unilaterally changing what had been decided.

between him and Goh.

If Malaysia was uncertain of its right, the proper thing would have been to refer the matter to arbitration or take the issue to court.

“It gave in supposedly because the Malaysian legal authorities believe Singapore is in the right. It would be interesting to read the grounds for the Attorney-General to conclude that Singapore has what amounts to extra-territorial rights and Malaysia has no sovereign right within its own territorial waters.” he said.

Dr Mahathir said that he did not believe that Singapore would refuse to allow the half- bridge to connect with its Singapore’s side of the Causeway. “That would certainly constitute an unfriendly act. It would be tantamount to Singapore cutting its nose to spite its face.” he said.

'Detailed account of options available to us'

On April 25, Tan Sri Fuzi Abdul Razak gave a detailed account on why the Malaysian government decided to abort the plan to build a bridge to replace the Causeway. The decision was reached after studying four options before the Government.

Option 1: Approve the Broad Political Understanding (BPU) and proceed with detailed negotiations to conclude a final agreement.

With such a strong mandate, the Government could have gone ahead with the project and persuaded Malaysians later.

But the problem is the lingering concern that too much — sand and airspace — is being given away for the sake of the bridge.

Option 2: Proceed with the half-bridge to join the Singapore part of the Johor Causeway. Biggest problem with this option is that expert advice shows the need to consult and obtain approval of Singapore for the relocation of PUB water pipelines in the context of water and separation agreements.

Attorney-General also points out that if the Malaysian part of the Causeway is demolished unilaterally, Singapore could even halt KTM's use of the remaining Singapore part of the Causeway on account of structural integrity.

This will directly affect the running of railway services to Singapore. Should this continue for six months, KTM land in Singapore will revert to the republic.

Option 3: Unilaterally build a half-bridge that can eventually be linked to become a full bridge. No guarantee that Singapore would agree to build its side of the bridge without a balance of interests. This element of uncertainty would mean that Malaysia would be waiting for the bridge to be linked at Singapore's pleasure.

Such a hanging bridge would become a subject of ridicule and would affect Malaysia's image.

Option 4: Not to proceed with any bridge.

This was the option chosen by the Government, taking into account public sentiment on exporting sand and opening up airspace to the republic.

The Government's decision to scrap the bridge project would prevent both sides from being embroiled in endless political bickering and legal disputes.

The decision is not necessarily a win-lose situation. Malaysia did not lose even if it did not get the bridge.

Singapore too did not get what it wanted — sand and airspace.

'Main points of contention:'

* Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad says that he informed the then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong that Malaysia intended to build a half bridge to replace the Causeway.

Goh said that he would accept that decision, though he did not think that it was ideal.

Mahathir took this to mean that he had Singapore's agreement to build a bridge, since the exchange between both of them was in writing.

* Tan Sri Fuzi put Goh's letter in context. He noted that following Goh's letter, Dr Mahathir wrote to the Singapore PM and said: "I think we have now come to a point where it would be important for us to prioritise our discussions."

"The approach that both sides have adopted so far in dealing with the outstanding issues in a package has not yielded any meaningful results.

"In view of this, Malaysia has now decided to discontinue the package approach and to give the highest priority to first resolving the long-delayed water issue, particularly the price of raw water.

"Once this issue is satisfactorily and amicably resolved, I am confident that Malaysia and Singapore would be able to move forward much faster in finding solutions to the other outstanding issues that stand in the way of our bilateral relations."

After receiving this letter from Dr Mahathir, Goh replied that he had decided to withdraw the concession Singapore was prepared to make as part of trade-offs involving the bridge and related issues.

In a diplomatic note, Singapore explained that the agreement given by Goh was "made in the context of the then ongoing negotiations between the two Governments as an overall package of bilateral issues.

"With the termination of the package negotiations, the underlying basis for the statements in the letter of 11 April 2002 no longer exists.

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