

Ismail Sabri to meet Jokowi

The star - 8/11/2021 pg. 8

PM to address pending bilateral issues on maiden official trip overseas

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PETALING JAYA: Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob will go on his maiden overseas trip as Prime Minister tomorrow and the first stop is Indonesia to meet President Joko Widodo.

He will be the third Malaysian Prime Minister to meet the Indonesian leader since several government changes have taken place in the last three years.

President Joko, or Jokowi as he is popularly known, had also met Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in June 2018 and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in February this year.

It is an Asean tradition for leaders to make quick introductory visits within the region upon assuming office.

But the Covid-19 pandemic has affected and limited such travel, and even when leaders make these visits now, it would be after some time of assuming office.

Since last year, most regional meetings – including the recently concluded annual Asean summit chaired by Brunei – have been held virtually.

This trip, although introducto-

ry, is important because bilateral relations between Malaysia and Indonesia are strong despite some “speed bumps”.

The pandemic has slowed down engagement, but visits at the ministerial and government official levels have kicked off again to get things moving.

It is understood Ismail Sabri's visit will see the signing of two memoranda of understanding (MOU) involving education and Customs. However, no details were available as at press time.

There are many outstanding bilateral issues ranging from Indonesian domestic workers and foreign labour, to borders.

“There are many issues with Indonesia, they are more or less the same issues. It is also how we manage these issues with Indonesia,” said an official who declined to be named.

When the leaders meet in Bogor on Wednesday, they are expected to talk

about increasing bilateral trade.

Ismail Sabri, during a visit to Sandakan last Friday, indicated he would also raise the development at the Sabah-Kalimantan border with Jokowi.

Other issues would possibly be on pending MOUs, one on Indonesian labour and another on domestic helpers.

The Malaysian demand for Indonesian maids is still high, but discussions are ongoing to finalise the MOU. Indonesia has requested its domestic helpers be employed under the “one maid, one task” system.

“While the Indonesian government is looking into ensuring its citizens are well protected including getting proper salaries and one day off every week, we have a problem with the ‘one maid, one task’ system because it raises questions like if one household has three chil-

dren, do the maids just focus on the children?”

“Perhaps they can also help in keeping the house clean. That is being discussed,” said the official.

Ismail Sabri is also scheduled to meet Indonesian captains of industry after his meeting with Jokowi.

Another official noted that the Prime Minister has spoken about opening up the borders to ramp up trade and economy, and Malaysia's proposal for mutual recognition of both countries' vaccination certificates.

“It will be good for him to interact and engage with the business community as Malaysia is also interested in the new capital in Kalimantan,” the official added.

It has been reported that Indonesia is moving ahead with the plan to relocate its capital to Kalimantan in the first half of 2024.

Malaysia is also “nudging” Indonesia to hold the next annual leaders' consultation last held in 2019 when

Dr Mahathir hosted Jokowi.

But it will be busy times for Jakarta as it has just assumed chairmanship of the G20, a multilateral forum bringing together the world's major economies and the European Union.

Its members account for more than 60% of the world population, 75% of global trade and 80% of world GDP gross domestic product.

“I think we have to bear in mind when we deal with Indonesia, we should stop having this stigma that Indonesia is still backward.

“Indonesia is fast becoming an important power, and not only regionally,” said an official.

According to a World Bank report, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous nation and 10th largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity.

“Indonesia will be among the top countries in trade by 2050 and there is nothing you can do about it due to its geography and population.

“Those are indicators of how important Indonesia is and we must see it in this light.”

