

Malaysia, Singapore shed past baggage

Amiable dynamic between Anwar,
Hsien Loong can temper future rifts

MALAYSIA'S 58-year relationship with Singapore is unique, shifting between affection and spats. On great days, we are a tight family and community, and on good days, we are regional and diplomatic allies. On contentious days, we are robust competitors, but on bad days, the quarrel weaves its way into arbitration in international court. A once-over of this love-hate relationship since the republic broke away from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 unearthed a sub-context: the wrestling was mostly dominated by two exponents — the former prime ministers Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew.

Born in the depression decade, coming of age in the war years and, since taking over as PMs, wielding imperious power for decades, Dr Mahathir and Lee both carried the burden of nation-building and exuded bigger-than-life personas. In essence, it's hard to distinguish between the person and the nation: both Dr Mahathir and Lee willed top-down diktats. Their common characteristics are legendary: formidable intellect, charismatic, witty on stage and influential in local and global affairs. Legend had it that in 1964,

*... Malaysia
and
Singapore have
leapt on a solid
platform over the
old quicksand of
contentious
issues.*

when Dr Mahathir made his presence felt as a member of parliament in the Dewan Rakyat, Lee found a worthy political adversary that he presciently said his opposite number would be Malaysia's future prime minister. Since then, the two titans have had nothing but mutual, if not grudging, respect. As a political experiment, if Dr Mahathir and Lee were to trade countries as prime minister, would the stormy relations and self-preservation policies remain? It

could, seeing how similar their temperaments obtrude into their political lives. Seasoned commentators described them as abrasive, power-hungry, dogmatic, ambitious, cunning, ruthless, patriotic, obsessive, loyal and passionate. It was against this backdrop that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim held talks with his Singaporean counterpart, Lee's son, Lee Hsien Loong, in the city state recently. Anwar and Hsien Loong have similar generational traits: born in the post-war years and who refused to lug the baggage of their intimidating predecessors, a timely boon to foster and improve relations. And it did: Anwar and Hsien Loong emerged out of their talks smiling and conciliatory, with newfound trust and a clutch of agreements to settle old disputes over water, airspace, border crossings, connectivity, food and cyber securities. In all, Malaysia and Singapore have leapt on a solid platform over the old quicksand of contentious issues.

Intriguingly, what would Dr Mahathir and the older Lee think of this? Lee died in 2015. We can postulate that he and Dr Mahathir would remain defiant as ever, unwilling to retire in peace. In any case, their thoughts are inconsequential: Anwar and Hsien Loong have accomplished a greater and amiable dynamic that can temper future rifts.