



Beyond boundaries

MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR
merga@thestar.com.my

FOR more than 20 years, I have been writing about the water supply issue, that precious Malaysian commodity sold to our neighbour, Singapore. For several years it was a contentious subject and until today, the price of the raw water has yet to be resolved.

Then there is also the maritime delimitation boundary negotiations and the use of Malaysian airspace, two issues that have been on the table since Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was the prime minister (first round).

After several prime ministers on both sides of the Causeway (including Dr Mahathir, twice) solutions are not in sight.

Year in and year out, leaders of both countries have been having annual consultations and while these issues are still unresolved, bilateral relations have flourished in other sectors, especially in trade, economy, and people to people movement.

Since the last Singapore-Malaysia Leaders' Retreat in October 2023, the 10th consultation, there may have been progress made at the working level discussions, which means officials are at least talking to each other.

Between **trust** and **national interest**

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his Singapore counterpart Lawrence Wong have set a positive tone to resolving outstanding bilateral issues between Malaysia and Singapore - but will good relations between leaders trickle down the line?



Friendly meet: Anwar (left) walking Lawrence out of a luncheon at the Seri Perdana Complex earlier this month. — Prime Minister's Office

Is there "water" at the end tunnel under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his newly-minted Singaporean counterpart Lawrence Wong's respective leaderships?

They met for the first time in Putrajaya recently as Wong was on an introductory visit since he took office a few weeks ago.

Over a lovely meal (Wong's words) with IOI, musang king and blackthorn durians served at Seri Perdana, Anwar and Wong seemed to hit it off well. Of course, since this is their first meeting as leaders they would have wanted to say all the right things. Wong, unsurprisingly, is as polished a speaker as one would expect of a Singaporean prime minister. He was groomed for the

job and stood at ease next to Anwar when addressing journalists from both countries.

This is not the usual annual leaders consultation but they could still raise certain issues without dwelling on ceremony. Not to make any decisions but just to put out exploratory feelers. It was about setting the right tone.

Anwar was the first to raise water, air space, and maritime border issues at the joint press conference, where he said these issues should be resolved in the interest of future relations and strengthening of bonds.

Wong said both leaders had candid discussions on the outstanding bilateral issues, and they agreed to provide strategic direction to officials to make progress

in their discussions.

"Eventually we will take stock at the coming retreat and while the issues are complex and take time to resolve, we are fully committed to managing them to enable overall relations to flourish," Wong said.

Malaysia still feels that the two water agreements signed with Singapore are lopsided. One was signed in 1961 and already lapsed in 2011 while the other signed in 1962 expires in 2061. It gives Singapore 250 million gallons of raw water daily at 3 sen per 1,000 gallons. Malaysia buys back a portion of that, treated, at 50 sen per 1,000 gallons.

Singapore had previously maintained that Malaysia lost its right to review the price of raw water sold under the 1962 agreement. Talks have failed in the past due to large differences between the two sides.

On delimitation of maritime boundaries, both Singapore and Malaysia's leaders at the last retreat said they looked forward to the first meeting of the Malaysia-Singapore Joint Technical Committee on the Implementation of the International Court of Justice Judgment on Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks, and South Ledge and the Committee for Boundary Delimitation.

Negotiations are ongoing and the Attorney General's Chambers is taking the lead. However, those involved in maritime boundary delimitation know how complex the situation is.

"It takes time. This involves national interest. We cannot

rush," said an official.

Both leaders have made it known that they want a win-win solution.

"When we talk about maritime boundary delimitation, it is not just legal matters, there are so many issues involved. We cannot compromise on certain issues," said the official.

When asked what his priorities are in dealing with Malaysia, Wong insisted it is about focusing on building good relations with Anwar.

"Because trust is everything - when there is trust, especially between leaders, we can get many things done.

"We were able to establish a strong rapport and trust with each other, and that will allow us to send a clear message to our ministers and officials that we want them to negotiate, discuss the outstanding issues in the right spirit. Do it in a way that will enable both sides to achieve win-win outcomes.

"Even when there are differences among us, that is OK, always focus on the larger picture and overall relations," Wong said.

Leaders usually have a bird's eye view on the issues at hand and can guide their ministers and officials who are doing the actual negotiations.

But it is a different story at the working level at which officials have to thrash things out face to face. Despite strategic direction, the working levels still have to iron out all the intricate details.

Boundary negotiations are often protracted to ensure that all rights and interests at stake are covered for both sides.

When asked about a timeline for the issues, Anwar said the faster it could be done, the better.

It would be wonderful and marvellous, he said, if the issues are resolved before the next annual consultations in Malaysia later this year and be a showcase in the region of how good neighbours tackle their differences.

It will be interesting how this level of cosiness and trust will evolve under these two leaders. And will such feel good vibes trickle down the line?