

Singapore Wants More Win-win Cooperation with Malaysia

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By Azman Ujang and Massita Ahmad

SINGAPORE, Nov 30 (Bernama) -- Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says he wants to see more win-win cooperation with Malaysia with him and his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak enjoying a "very good relationship".

In an exclusive interview with Bernama at the Istana here Monday, Lee said he and Najib had been focused on bilateral relations and the leaders and people of both countries need to understand each better through more intimate interaction at all levels in order to appreciate each other's perspective and views, coming as they do from two "very different countries".

"The more we see one another, the more we work together on win-win cooperation, I think the better the prospects for friendship and for harmonious relations," he said of the state of ties now between the two countries which Najib had recently described as "never been better in our countries' histories".

He said the proposed High Speed Rail (HSR) linking Kuala Lumpur and Singapore would not only bring economic benefits but would make it much easier for the people of both countries to go back and forth.

Lee described the HSR project as "very ambitious, complicated and expansive" whose success would depend very much on "good execution" by both governments.

He also spoke at length about the time-honored Singapore recipe that has enabled the island state to always maintain its position as one of the world's least-corrupt countries.

Following is the transcript of the interview:

Q: Prime Minister, there is something special about Singapore and Malaysia, which perhaps does not happen anywhere else in the world. Both you and Prime Minister (Datuk Seri) Najib (Tun) Razak are sons of contemporary Prime Ministers of both our countries at one time, in the past. What does this unique backdrop mean to you?

PM: It is a point in common that we share and sometimes we swap notes of what it was like to be the children of former Prime Ministers. It is a positive factor because it means that both of us have had environments where we have been focused on this bilateral relationship of Singapore and Malaysia for a very large part of our lives. We know how important it is and we would like to make it better, which I think we are not doing badly.

Q: Would you say that this special bond has helped make things much easier in the conduct of relations between Singapore and Malaysia? To quote Prime Minister Najib, which "have never been better in our countries' histories".

PM: In this case it has been helpful. We are happy for it. I have a very good relationship with PM Najib and we hope to do more with Malaysia.

Q: Both you and PM Najib have taken our bilateral relations to higher notches. Moving forward, on another front, what do you think can be done by leaders and administrators to help break down the walls of mistrust, if they do exist?

PM: Our two countries have a very close relationship and yet, we are very different. Our societies are different - values, cultures and the way we look at the world. It is not a criticism on either side but it is the way things are. So while we have to work closely together, we must realise that we are not the same as each other. That is why we became two countries.

To improve the relationship, we have to understand each other better, have more intimate interactions to appreciate each other's perspectives on our relationship as well as on the world. We also have to respect and be able to cooperate despite the contrast. This is very important at the leaders' level, at ministers' and officials' level, and also at the peoples' level. The more we see one another and the more we work together on win-win cooperation, the better prospects for friendship and for harmonious relations.

For a project like the high speed rail, that is one of the benefits. It is not just economic benefits, but it will make it much easier for people to go back and forth, spend time in Kuala Lumpur instead of Singapore, or for that matter Seremban or even Batu Pahat. That can only be for good.

Q: It has been one and a half years now that Singapore has been without the founding father, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew. How has it been since, considering that he has cast a larger-than-life shadow over Singapore and Singaporeans? And if I may ask, how has it been for your family?

PM: Mr Lee prepared well for the day when Singapore would have to continue without him. In terms of preparing for the succession and gradually fading away from the public limelight, it was a process which he did very consciously over many years.

When he passed away, we all grieved greatly but at the same time we were prepared. Singapore carried on. We maintained our confidence, strengthened our sense of cohesion, and a year later, we marked the first anniversary this year of his passing on 23rd March. The sadness is still there, but life has had to go on. We strengthened ourselves, remembering his memory and what his teachings were. That is the way forward for Singapore. Similarly, for the family, you have to go through a process of grief and acceptance, but my father lived a full life.

Q: The much-talked-about KL-Singapore High Speed Rail is deemed as a game changer and you said before that good execution will be crucial.

PM: Yes.

Q: Do you have specific advice to all officials who are involved in this massive, long-term investment? What are the pitfalls, among other things, that should be avoided?

PM: It is a very ambitious, very complicated and a very expansive project, in terms of scale. We have to try our best to anticipate what the likely issues are, when we build it, when we operate it, and have a clear understanding on how we will deal with it if a situation arises.

The first thing is to have a sound agreement between the two countries on the basis of how the project is structured, how it is going to be executed, and how it is backed by the two governments. We have been discussing the agreement, between Singapore and Malaysia for more than a year now, since several retreats ago. We have made very good progress. We are almost there, and I hope that when I meet Prime Minister Najib at the next retreat, we will be able to sign the agreement. That is the first requirement, that we have a very good agreement which sets out clearly a sound basis to build and operate the system.

Secondly, the project's execution will be very important - in designing it, in calling for tenders, evaluating the proposals, because several high-speed rail systems in the world have been lobbying very hard to get this contract - the Japanese, the Koreans, the Chinese high-speed rail. Each has its strengths, and we will have a very difficult decision evaluating the bidders who come along and deciding which one is the best overall.

Q: What about things like cost-sharing of construction?

PM: All those have to be clearly specified. That is one of the things which makes this project complicated because there are two governments involved. It is like the project from London to Paris, the Channel Tunnel. When you have two authorities involved, you have to decide how to partition, where the line is drawn. I build my part, you build your part, and we have to meet at the same point. If it does not meet then we have a big problem.

Q: Complication will be there.

PM: Yes. So it is complicated but there is a will. And there is a good will, and we would like to make it succeed.

Q: Having the high-speed rail, do you think now that a third bridge is still necessary or even viable?

PM: I would take it one step at a time. We are not currently planning for a third bridge. I have seen some statements in Malaysia suggesting one, but the high-speed rail is a very ambitious project. I would focus all my energies doing that one before we launch a new big project.

Q: In 2011, you and Prime Minister Najib signed an agreement to settle the dispute over certain parcels of land in Singapore that once belonged to the Malayan Railway. The highlight of that agreement was the establishment of a joint-venture company, M+S Pte Ltd, which was entrusted to carry out a joint development of this project in Marina South and Ophir-Rochor. What is the progress of that project so far?

PM: It is doing well. I see the project at Marina South and at Ophir-Rochor, both buildings are coming up and rising steadily. I read that they have reasonable sales so I think the projects will succeed. On

the Iskandar side, there are two iconic projects, one of them is the Afiniti Medini Wellness Centre. I think they are making good progress too.

Q: In October 2016 you launched a cyber-security strategy as part of efforts to be a safe and smart nation.

PM: Yes.

Q: One of the strategies is by separating public agencies' work computers from Web surfing.

PM: Yes.

Q: Making Singapore the only country in the world, I think, to do so.

PM: I am not sure we are the only country in the world.

Q: What is the rationale behind this move?

PM: It is a basic precaution we have to take, because we do all our business on the network - our emails within the Government, as well as our interactions with the public. When it comes to web browsing and surfing, if we use the same system as your emails and as your internal network, we are very vulnerable. Because whatever anti-virus software and firewalls we put in, there is always the possibility that something will slip through. So I see a tempting line or a photograph and you click it, I compromise not just my own computer but the whole network. Having struggled with this problem for quite a long time, like other organisations, we finally decided that the only way forward is to separate the two. Emails in one system, but if you want to surf the Internet, please use a separate computer. You can use your tablet, you can use your smartphone, or if it is essential for your job, the government may give you a separate computer and you put the two side by side. It is a more secure way of operating, keeping our system clean. We can operate efficiently. I have been doing this since the beginning of the year. It is a nuisance but it is workable.

Q: This is a question which many people want me to ask you. How does Singapore manage to keep itself to always be one of the least-corrupt countries in the world?

PM: We try very hard. It is not easy, but it is necessary to continue making the effort. It helps that we started on the right footing. Right from the beginning when the PAP took over in 1959, this was a prime consideration. We wanted to run a clean system, a clean civil service and a clean political leadership. We have been quite unsparing in enforcing that. Whoever transgresses, whether it is senior or not, whether it is a civil servant or a minister, we have to investigate and consequences have to follow. That is a very important part of it.

Another very important part of it is the attitudes of the public who have grown to expect this of the Government. When something goes wrong and somebody did something not quite right, we will often receive a report, maybe anonymous. We will investigate it. If there is something there, then we will pursue it. The public attitude is very important. Because without that, if the public accepts that it is a normal way to do business, that if you are in power then these are perks of the office, that will be a

very different situation even if we have the laws.

Thirdly, we have tried our best to make our pay fair and realistic for civil servants as well as for the ministers, so that we minimise the temptation for somebody to say that I cannot live on my salary, I have got to look after my family. In Singapore, there is no reason to say that. You come in, you cannot expect to get rich in the Government, but you should not become poor because you had to do public service.

Q: You recently announced in Parliament that the next Presidential Election in Singapore, due next year, will be reserved for candidates from the Malay community. Could you shed some light, especially for us in Malaysia, on the election process, like the selection and criteria of candidates, and how many candidates are being shortlisted?

PM: We have a system where our President is elected by a national vote. In your case, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is elected amongst the nine rulers. In our case it is a national vote. In a national vote in a multiracial society, it is harder for a minority candidate to win than for a Chinese candidate to win. We have had one minority President, he served two terms, Mr S R Nathan, since we introduced the scheme of the elected President. But we worry over the long term that without a system to ensure that a minority becomes the President from time to time, then it is going to be difficult and we will have long periods where we do not have a minority as a President. So we decided that we will make such a system, put it into the Constitution, that if after five terms we do not have a President from a particular minority community - that means either no Malay President or no Indian or other minority President - then in the next term, the election will be reserved for candidates from that community. In our case, we have had five terms without a Malay elected President. In fact, if you look at the presidents before that, before the present system, it is 45 years since Yusof Ishak. Therefore, the next election will be reserved for a Malay candidate. I do not know how many will come. There is no shortlist because it depends on who offers themselves.

Q: What will be the criteria like?

PM: The criteria are the same whether it is a reserved election or not. You must have that experience, either in the public sector or private sector. At least three years' experience in the private sector as a CEO of a company with at least 500 million shareholders equity. In the public sector, you have to be either a Minister or a Chief Justice, or the Speaker of Parliament, or have served in a list of appointments which qualify you. Then depending on who comes, there will be an election.

Q: Do you have such candidates already in mind?

PM: We do not have anybody specific in mind but we know there are people who will qualify. If nobody presents, who is Malay, then it becomes an open election. Then others can also participate.

Q: Has this process started, the shortlisting and ...?

PM: As I said, there is no shortlist. It depends who comes forward. It is not for the Government to arrange. It is for the candidates to come forward.

Q: I have come to my final question, Prime Minister. Some eight years ago, you said that Singapore may have a non-Chinese Prime Minister one day but it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. To quote you then, "race is still a factor that determines voters' preferences in Singapore although attitudes have shifted". By the same token as opening the office of the President to be assumed by the minority community, my question is, is Singapore anywhere near than before to having its first non-Chinese Prime Minister? And could it happen in our lifetime?

PM: It could happen in our lifetime. If you look at America, Barack Obama became president. In their case, it took 200-something years, or 100-something years if you count from the time of the Civil War. It is a long process but it is possible and I hope one day it will happen.

The racial patterns of voting is something very deeply ingrained. It is so in Malaysia; it is so in Singapore, perhaps less so in Singapore but it exists. If you look at America, even in this election, it was quite clear that the different ethnic groups had very different voting patterns. So that is a reality of human nature which we have to accept.

Q: So the succession question, is Singapore ... how do you see the succession ...?

PM: I have a team of younger Ministers. I brought some of them in in 2011, some more last year in 2015. They are all working hard, doing well. I hope that soon after the next election, amongst them they will have decided, settled and the leader will be ready to take over from me.

Q: Thank you very much Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you very much Datuk.

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