

Malaysia And Indonesia: Nations Of The Same Malay Race

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There should be no anger about the Indonesian flag being printed upside down in the Kuala Lumpur SEA Games booklets distributed to attendants of the opening ceremony on Saturday — it was a genuine mistake. Unfortunately, however, the error has triggered nationwide anger and retaliatory sarcasm in Indonesia, particularly in social media.

Both Malaysian Foreign Minister Sri Anifah Haji Aman and Youth and Sports Minister Brig. Gen. Khairy Jamaluddin apologized for the incident, which they said had been inadvertently committed by the Malaysian Organizing Committee. Indonesia's government has rightly accepted Malaysia's mea culpa, as reflected in the meeting between Youth and Sports Minister Imam Nahrawi and Jamaluddin on Sunday.

Indeed, there's no reason to make a fuss about the mistake, given the ASEAN spirit that has bound the two nations and other Southeast Asian neighbors for the last 50 years. Indonesia and Malaysia, both co-founders of ASEAN, and fellow association members have just celebrated their historic achievement and agreed on commitments for a strong, prosperous and stable community.

The Games' theme, Rising Together, epitomizes the host nation's good will to promote regional solidarity through the two-week sporting competition.

Now that Malaysia has confessed the mistake and offered an olive branch, Indonesia should shift its focus back to the competition. Indonesia is trailing behind host country Malaysia and other rivals in the medals race, and failure to move on will only cost its bid to reclaim its supremacy in the SEA Games.

The flag blunder shows that first and foremost we have failed to show our maturity. Perhaps our nationalist fervor has ignited hostility toward Malaysia, reflected in, among other things, calls for the whole team to withdraw from the competition in the name of national pride.

Such animosity has also been felt beyond the sports arena, as evidenced by debates over the heritage right of traditional songs and other cultural products pitting the two neighbors, and rallies in Jakarta in response to Malaysia's law enforcement against undocumented Indonesian migrant workers.

As the clamor over the flag incident has suggested, relations between the two nations of the same Malay race have remained as fragile as ever. Continuous efforts to build common understanding particularly among the peoples are therefore imperative.

On the Malaysian side, however, the flag gaffe may not simply constitute poor supervision of the production process of official guide books. It could signal a more serious problem that Malaysian people are strangers to Indonesia, despite their similar origin — and perhaps vice versa.

God forbid such worries have any grounds. Otherwise it would put the build-up of ASEAN as a single community in jeopardy.

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