

Singapore is simply a neighbour too far

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Singapore has every right to pursue her own agenda as she sees fit. We only hope that she will grant us a similar right to follow ours without screaming foul play at every opportunity, and imputing improper motives, writes TUNKU ABDUL AZIZ.

INDIVIDUALS can, within limits, determine who their neighbours should be. Nations, unfortunately, do not enjoy that luxury. As far as we are concerned, Singapore is a case in point.

We must concede that Singapore has every right to pursue her own agenda as she sees fit. We can only hope that she will grant us a similar right to follow ours without screaming foul play at every opportunity, and imputing improper motives.

Neither of us owes the other a living. We have no hidden agenda, and do not harbour or aspire to any expansionist or territorial ambitions. If we had wanted to hang on to what many of us then considered an abomination, we would not have shown Singapore the door.

Being small is not always easy, especially when you are trying to flex your muscles and punch above your weight. To be constantly reminded that you are nothing more than a red dot on the face of the earth as President B.J. Habibii of Indonesia once did, somewhat insensitively, must have touched some very raw nerves, especially for a country that can justifiably claim a string of successes on so many fronts.

To us, Singapore appears to behave too much like an insecure lover, forever demanding to know how much she is loved. The lack of confidence is difficult to understand when she is not without ample assets herself, for the entire world to see. The insatiable craving for praise and adoration would point to some flaw in the national character, but this we know cannot be the case because the affairs of Singapore are in the hands of highly capable and rational men and women.

To say that Malays are envious of her good fortune is an absolute misrepresentation. As a Malay, I know that my race entertains no such resentment. The same goes, I am sure, for other Malaysians. We hold Singapore up as a role model worthy of emulation in many important areas of national life. I must admit, though, we find her approach to our concerns a

trifle mercenary, legalistic and clinical. We believe a little human touch and love will not go amiss, and can soften the hardness of attitudes.

I am on record as being a great admirer of Lee Kuan Yew, the Minister Mentor. He has been, and continues to be, my inspiration in the fight against corruption, and for ethical private and public behaviour. The highest point of my life as an anti-corruption activist was when I succeeded, after months of exhaustive effort, in honouring Lee in Singapore on his 80th birthday by presenting Transparency International Malaysia's International Integrity Medal.

I have spent the last 10 years telling the world how one man's abiding aversion for corruption and everything to do with it has transformed a once corrupt colonial backwater into a much admired "Island of Integrity". I mention this as a way of showing that many people I know well in every strata of Malay society honour Lee for his personal integrity and high ethical standards. Therefore, it is more in sorrow than anger that I touch on this subject in this column.

Singapore is not an unknown quantity to us in Malaysia. She is in a sense of us, but not part of us. The historical ties that are supposed to underpin our

relations amount to nothing and to view them through rose-tinted spectacles would distort even further a relationship that has never been known for its convergence of views even on the most pedestrian of issues. Rather, it has all the makings and attributes of a potentially protracted and acrimonious future.

We cannot be continually distracted by having to put out one diplomatic, and not so diplomatic, fire after another. There are far better things to do in our country for the benefit of our people.

The late Tunku Abdul Rahman, with impeccable intuition, read the situation well when he decided that Malaysia had had enough of Singapore, incessantly and noisily barking and snapping at the heel.

In our dealings with Singapore, we cannot take her at face value. Let us disabuse ourselves quickly of the notion that sentiments and goodwill will cut any ice with her. We have to adopt an equally cold, clinical and legalistic approach, as they do. How often have we ended up drawing the short straw in our negotiations with Singapore? The most unforgettable was undoubtedly the MSA (Malaysia-Singapore Airline) divorce from which we came away with nothing to write home about.

Singapore has always made it clear that she has no time for sentimental nonsense, and operates simply on the basis of extracting the maximum advantage she can wangle out of any deal, no matter what.

Based on our past experience with her, and in order to avoid unnecessary unpleasantness, such as being accused of bullying a small neighbour and of other unfair and malevolent behaviour, we should, as far as possible, leave Singapore completely alone.

She is a neighbour too far, with apologies to *A Bridge Too Far*. It has become apparent that it is simply not worth the effort to cultivate this uncultivable neighbour. You cannot ever be right with her because she is never wrong. Winning some and losing some is not something that sits well with her. Winners take all is a strategy that appears to be well entrenched in Singapore's national psyche.

Our relations with a neighbour such as Singapore, with her propensity for, and unseemly preoccupation with, scoring a debating point or two at every turn must be circumscribed by the most formal and correct behaviour. It is clear that while we cannot avoid living next door to each other, we should lead separate lives, taking nothing from Singapore that is not rightfully ours, and, in turn, give her nothing that is not due to her.

This policy of minimum engagement is the secret of peaceful accommodation. We should make our position entirely clear so that there is no misunderstanding of where we stand as a neighbour. We know where they stand, and we as a peaceful people must never be lulled into a false sense of security because Singapore has never tried to conceal its abiding faith in the doctrine of pre-emption in all her business dealings.

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