



Setting Our House in Order

It might be heartening to note that Malaysia-Singapore bilateral ties have improved under the present administration, as former Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia K Kesavapany writes in his book *Singapore-Malaysia Relations Under Abdullah*. But sadly, at the same time, it's highly disheartening to note that some Malaysians are voluntarily foregoing their forced savings due to inflation and other unresolved issues in the country.

IF WE ARE TO TAKE THE WORD OF ONE MAN AS THE ACCURATE MEASURE of the relations between our country and Singapore, then the conclusion we can draw is that the two countries are a lot friendlier these days.

And the key factor that has improved the relationship is our Prime Minister of the last two-and-a-half years, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. That's the view of the former Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia, K Kesavapany, as contained in the book *Singapore-Malaysia Relations Under Abdullah*, which he co-authored.

In the book, according to a report in *The Star* newspaper on July 24, Kesavapany, who was High Commissioner between 1997 and 2002, penned his thoughts on the way things have improved and on the direction of future bilateral ties. He outlined the role played by Abdullah and the impact his leadership has had on relations between the two countries.

The Kuala Lumpur-born Kesavapany considered the period coinciding with his tenure as being the most stressful in the history of relations between Singapore and Malaysia. He came to this conclusion based on the fact that many issues remained unresolved despite many rounds of negotiations marked by bitter exchanges between officials from both countries, which led to unhealthy trends at the people-to-people level.

The impasse, said Kesavapany, came to an end when Abdullah became Prime Minister on Oct 30, 2003.

Of diplomatic jargon and the truth
I have not read the book. But the question that comes to my mind is: Have these

outstanding issues really been resolved?

The way that we are being told, the old issues remain unsolved and new ones have cropped up. And if we understand these statements correctly, Singapore is the cause.

We were on the way to building the scenic crooked bridge on our side of the Johor Straits when, all of a sudden, the Abdullah administration told us that the project had to be cancelled because Singapore might or would sue us if we proceeded.

We were further told that Singapore might or would allow us to build the bridge if we sold billions of cubic metres of sand and allowed their Air Force jets to fly in our airspace. So, if the impasse between the two countries had indeed come to an end when Abdullah became

Prime Minister, why this unreasonable demand for our sand and the use of our airspace? Why threaten us with legal suits that have scared the daylights out of our *keris*-yielding leaders?

Pardon me if I don't understand this diplomatic double-talk, but I am sure we can count on both our Prime Minister and our Minister of Foreign Affairs, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, to enlighten us because both are experienced in diplomacy.

But as our diplomats, including our chief negotiator, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, withdrew into their bunkers after being bombarded by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Singapore once again has taken the lead in shaping global public opinion.

While our mainstream media and the

I WONDER IF MALAYSIA'S INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) AND OTHER THINK-TANKS CONDUCT SIMILAR TYPES OF OVERT INTELLIGENCE GATHERING ON PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AND OTHER UPCOMING SINGAPORE LEADERS. IN THE MEANTIME, WE SHOULD ALL READ KESAVAPANY'S BOOK. WHO KNOWS, WE MAY LEARN SOMETHING NEW ABOUT OUR PRIME MINISTER AND OTHER MALAYSIAN LEADERS.

officially-sanctioned opinion makers are dedicating themselves to demonising and demolishing a lone Dr Mahathir, the Singapore propaganda machines are churning out books and articles to tell the world of yet another glorious chapter in the Singapore story.

The Singapore Government has no qualms about declassifying official secrets and publishing private correspondence and personal notes, as it did when it published the book *Water Talks? If Only it Could* in 2003 to tell its side of the story on the failed water negotiations.

Ironically, some brilliant legal minds in our country still insist that details contained in the same documents cannot be revealed because they are official secrets. What secrets?

Kesavapany's eight-chapter book is a project undertaken under the Institute of South-East Asian Studies' (Iseas) Malaysia Study Programme to document the series of important events under Abdullah's leadership that have contributed towards better bilateral ties.

Kesavapany, who is Iseas director, co-wrote the book with Iseas professorial fellow Saw Swee-Hock.

It is very generous of the institute to launch a special programme to literally study our new Prime Minister, in particular, the events that have contributed towards bettering ties with Singapore.

I wonder if Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis) and other think-tanks conduct similar types of overt intelligence gathering on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and other upcoming Singapore leaders.

In the meantime, we should all read Kesavapany's book. Who knows, we may learn something new about our Prime Minister and other Malaysian leaders.

It's No Fun to Be Poor

WHY would you cheat on your future? One of the reasons is that your present needs need taking care of. How can you think of your future when your present begs attention?

That, to my mind, is the short and the long end of the poser on why many employers are colluding with their employees to evade contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) board.

I don't have to apologise if I am wrong. I am merely simplifying what the EPF had said, as headlined by *The Star* on July 24. According to the report, many employers have been found to be colluding with their employees to evade their mandatory contributions. Employees prefer more take-home pay, while employers, mostly small and medium-sized companies, want to cut cost. They are so sure that's what they want that they have entered into formal agreements. The reason, according to the report, is the rising cost of living.

EPF's Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Management & Organisational Development) Rusma Ibrahim said employers would still be liable even if they had signed an agreement with their employees.

Small companies gave the excuse that it was a hassle to fill the relevant EPF forms, but Rusma said it would take less than 15 minutes to fill the monthly pre-printed remittance forms of 10 employees. They could pay via the e-forms and online remittance.

But the real answer to this conundrum has been provided by the

Small and Medium Industries Association of Malaysia's Secretary-General Lee Teck Meng. He said the RM800-RM1,000 a-month average income that SMI workers are receiving is not enough for them to survive in the cities.

When *The Star* asked him what the workers thought about savings for the future, Lee said: 'If they cannot survive reasonably now, how can they think about their future? However, we tell our members they must contribute to EPF.'

Lee concluded that the workers' economic situation had worsened since 1997, and the increase in the price of fuel, which has led to higher inflation, has added to their hardship. Indeed, Bank Negara Malaysia Governor Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz said on July 25 that the current rising prices were caused by rising costs and not increased demand.

Well, need we say more? No, except that life for these workers cannot be brilliant (*gemilang*), excellent (*cemerlang*) and outstanding (*terbilang*).

Why the Double Standards Bursa?

BURSA Malaysia has warned investors 'to be careful and diligent' in their investment activities. Thank you very much, I say. Now you tell me: What's new?

Even in the good times, when the economy was booming and there was clear direction, the market was rigged every now and then.

We are in desperate times now, and desperate times call for desperate measures. People have to live.

Unfortunately, not everyone is a billionaire or has powerful government contacts and savvy corporate mentors. So they dabble in the Bursa once in a while.


Why warn us at all? Bursa must examine its own position and stance vis-à-vis some of the recent manipulative activities affecting some counters.

And it is unthinkable to think that Bursa is neutral, uninvolved and without any opinion on some of the more controversial corporate deals.

Are we supposed to believe that Bursa chiefs have no opinion whatsoever about the much-debated valuation of government-owned Avenue Capital Resources vis-à-vis its takeover by ECM Libra?

Whereas the burden of responsibility for such a controversial deal falls rightly on the Securities Commission (SC), surely the Bursa, which trades in the shares of these companies on a daily basis, has a say or, at the very least, a moral obligation to speak up on behalf of the investing public.

Instead of making a brief three- or four-line statement that scares off small-time investors like me, Bursa should be giving the market the direction it now lacks.

As for the SC, its promise of transparency, which will now include public announcements on why some initial public offerings are rejected, should be expanded to include its decisions on such controversial deals as the Avenue Capital Resources takeover by ECM Libra. 

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