



## Late, Muted Response to Lee Kuan Yew

Singapore's Minister Mentor is at it again; trying to incite trouble by using the race card to benefit the tiny island republic. Knowing his style, we should be more forceful in expressing our stand, especially when the allegations are damning.

IT TOOK THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT A WHOLE WEEK TO RESPOND to a very serious allegation by Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

On Sept 15, at a symposium in Singapore held in conjunction with the annual International Monetary Fund-World Bank meeting on the island republic, Lee had accused Malaysia and Indonesia of systematically marginalising their ethnic Chinese population. 'Our neighbours both have problems with their Chinese. They are successful. They are hardworking and, therefore, they are systematically marginalised,' he said. Lee also accused Indonesia and Malaysia of wanting the Chinese-dominated Singapore to be, like their Chinese, compliant.

These are very serious allegations, especially when seen in the context that they were made. The former Singapore Prime Minister, who ruled with an iron fist for 25 years, was, in fact, defending his draconian rule. 'My main critics want me to be as liberal, open and contentious and adversarial with the Opposition as the West,' Lee was reported as saying at the meeting, whose other key speaker was the former US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers.

Lee said those who wanted Singapore to embrace a more liberal style of democracy had failed to see the limits of its geography. And in his typical belligerent and conspiratorial self, Lee pointed to Indonesia and Malaysia as the reason why Singapore could not afford a more liberal environment.

Defending the People's Action Party (PAP)'s political dominance, Lee said it was vital for the predominantly ethnic Chinese Singapore to stand up to the bigger Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia. Using Indonesia and Malaysia to cow the Singaporeans into sticking with the PAP, Lee said the city-state would eventually collapse if the Opposition was elected. 'We need a government that will have the gumption and skill to say "no" to our neighbours in a very quiet and polite way that doesn't provoke them into doing something silly.'

It's okay if Lee wants to be the chief overseer of Singapore until he dies. Or if he wants the PAP and his clan to rule Singapore with an iron fist until kingdom come. But to justify his illiberal policies by making disparaging remarks about its neighbours because they are larger and predominantly Muslim is irresponsible.

Instead of attacking Malaysia and Indonesia, and provoking the Chinese population of the two countries, Lee should have used his vast influence to work for greater integration of the region.

It is an act of bad faith for Lee to malign Malaysia and Indonesia, which are contributing vastly to Singapore's continued prosperity and security. Or is there a hidden agenda? Knowing Lee, such a possibility cannot be discounted.

Could Lee be trying to foment discontent amongst Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese to undermine the stability of the two countries for selfish economic and political gains?

Being a financial centre, Singapore has always benefited from an outflow of funds from Malaysia and Indonesia, as was the case during the 1997 speculative attacks on the ringgit, rupiah and Thai baht. But Lee should also be reminded that a politically unstable Malaysia and Indonesia cannot be good for Singapore. So, it would be good if Lee could explain the necessity to attack Malaysia and Indonesia in front of an international audience, more so when his reason for doing so was to defend and justify his illiberal domestic policies.

### 'Naughty' or just plain malicious?

SEVERAL mainstream Malaysian newspapers reported Lee's outburst but none prominently. It was not until Sept 21 that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak responded to the attack, describing it mildly as 'naughty'.

Well, I don't know what Najib meant exactly by 'naughty'. I thought only five- or six-year-olds could be naughty in what they said and did.

But when someone as old (83) and highly-positioned as Lee maligns two sovereign nations with a combined population of nearly 250 million, he wasn't being naughty. He was being worse than bad. He was being malicious.

Pardon me if I am wrong in my understanding of the term 'naughty' as used by Najib. Maybe Najib 'the gentleman' could not pull himself together to call a spade a spade unlike his former boss and mentor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. On Sept 22, the former Prime Minister dismissed Singapore as a 'tiny' country and said it should mind its own business. 'Don't be like that Kuan Yew. You just look after your rice bowl, that is all. The country is tiny, don't be too proud,' he said.

I would not dare say that Najib is scared of Lee, in particular, and Singapore, in general, having been made to look foolish over the Causeway Bridge issue. Najib was harping on the virtues of the project, saying that Malaysia would go ahead with it, only to be upstaged by the Cabinet a few days later in April.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can conclude that the cancellation of the Causeway Bridge project on our side of the straits was the product of what Lee had described as 'having the gumption and skill to say "no" to neighbours in a quiet and polite way.'

Until today, we are yet to be told what exactly Singapore had threatened us with had we proceeded with the project, except that we were liable to be sued by the republic.

Singapore, on its part, has been quiet and 'polite' by not saying much about the cancellation. Of course, that's to its benefit. With negotiations on all outstanding matters having been suspended, Singapore, by default, continues to enjoy cheap water supply from Malaysia.

Having known Najib rather closely from 1977, when he was a first-term Member of Parliament for Pekan, I think he should be more forceful in standing up to the likes of Lee and in handling important issues if he hopes to become an effective Prime Minister sometime in the future.

### **An insult is an insult, explanation or not**

THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, joined the fray on Sept 23 upon his return from New York where he had addressed the United Nations General Assembly.

Speaking to reporters at the KL International Airport, Abdullah said he would write to Lee to ask him to explain his statement that Malaysian Chinese were being marginalised. Abdullah said he agreed with his deputy Najib that Lee's statement was 'naughty' and would seek clarification over the matter. 'I want to get an explanation from him on what he said and the reason for making the statement,' he said.

I hope between now and when the Prime Minister writes his letter, he would give some thought to the appropriateness of communicating with Lee. I am afraid the Prime Minister would be undermining his position and lowering his dignity by writing to Lee. Lee is not his equal. His equal in Singapore is Lee's son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Given the gravity of Lee's insult, I don't think a letter seeking explanation is appropriate. Instead, we should insist that our government send a strongly worded protest note to the Singapore Government. The Singapore Government must be held responsible for Lee's insult of Malaysia, unless, of course, the former Prime Minister is above the Cabinet and is not answerable to it.

Why bother giving Lee an opportunity to wriggle his way out of this mess? Why honour him with a letter from our Prime Minister?

Since the government and Umno are not that thoughtful when handling our own former Prime Minister (Dr Mahathir), why should they be so accommodating of Lee?

Anybody with some experience in politics and foreign relations would know who Lee is. He does not say anything without thinking it through.

In this particular instance, he deliberately insulted and undermined Malaysia and Indonesia to defend his illiberal policies and his intolerance of opposition.

So, what explanation do we want from him? Let's not subject ourselves to ridicule and embarrassment by writing this letter. What Lee and his government did to Dr Mahathir, they might do to Abdullah. They may make public his letter as they had done with Dr Mahathir's letters.

### **People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones**

SEEN in today's context, Lee's statement is also intended to portray Indonesia and Malaysia as being a threat because they are predominantly Muslim. For that reason, Lee took pains to deliberately single out the two countries although there are many other countries in this region with a substantial ethnic Chinese population.

Maybe we should turn around to remind Singapore that this train of thought does not help in our efforts to create a stable and progressive Asean region. Demonising and profiling Muslims and their countries do not help in widening our understanding of Muslims and the issues that provoke them.

It may be useful for Lee to take a leaf from the recently leaked US intelligence report that concluded that the war in Iraq has helped create a new generation of Islamic radicalism and that the overall terrorist threat has grown since the Sept 11, 2001 attacks.

The report was completed in April and represented a consensus view of the 16 disparate spy services inside the US Government.

Actually, it does not take an elaborate intelligence assessment to understand why places like US-occupied Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and now Lebanon are producing fresh, well-trained and war-hardened Muslim fighters.

Today, even the most liberal Muslim is finding it hard to justify his support of the US-led war on terror, when, at the centre of it, are lies and deceit.

Granted that Singapore has one of the largest and most heavily equipped Armed Forces in the region, military strength alone is not a guarantee.

Undermining Malaysia and Indonesia, under whatever guise and circumstance, does not, in the long run, serve Singapore's purpose. Singapore needs its neighbours as much as they need it. Maybe, Singapore needs its larger neighbours more. **mb**

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