Father And Son Leadership Story The World Has Not Seen Before

By Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 27 (Bernama) -- It was indeed a poignant picture, whose significance goes far beyond the mere handshakes and beaming smiles between the prime ministers of Malaysia and Singapore.

When Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong emerged from their retreat at Shangri-La Hotel on the island nation to face the media, perhaps, many among the hordes of reporters and camermen present were thinking that it was just another assignment.

But really, it was not. It is the kind of stuff that makes history in every sense of the word.

Where else, but here in Malaysia and Singapore, has the world seen two incumbent prime ministers whose fathers were also prime ministers of the two countries, over 30 years ago? Najib and Lee met to resolve bilateral problems that defied solution for decades, just as their fathers, the late Tun Abdul Razak and Lee Kuan Yew, had met from time to time, to deal with problems of their day.

This unique feeling of personal bond must have played in the minds of both prime ministers as they peered at each other when addressing the press conference.

It was obvious in their smiles, which in the words of former Malaysian foreign ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Hasmy Agam, shows that "the chemistry between them appears to be really good." Hasmy and his predecessors and successors only know too well, how testy and difficult diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Singapore have always been all these years.

It is, in many ways, most ironic.

While the peoples of both countries enjoy the best of relations being the closest of neighbours, geographically-speaking, their political leaders appeared almost always at logger-heads, even over petty matters -- until Najib took over as prime minister, just over a year ago.

In only their second meeting as heads of government, Najib and the younger Lee broke the ice and what they announced to the media was historic, in more ways than one.

Both countries have broken a 20-year impasse on the status of Malaysia's railway land owned by KTM Berhad (KTMB) in Singapore, a touchy issue that not only plagues, but at times, even haunts their ties at the expense of reaping the immense economic benefits that would obviously come their way.

On paper, it is a 20-year-old problem because of the Points of Agreement (POA) signed by both countries in 1990, to resolve this and other related issues.

But in reality, it has been a bone of contention between leaders and officials of both sides, even much earlier than that.

Najib and Lee agreed that the railway station in Tanjung Pagar, smack in Singapore prime land, be relocated by July 1, next year to Woodlands, just overlooking Johor Baru which is linked to Singapore by what is perhaps, the world's oldest Causeway, besides the so-called Second Link that came much later.

And in one stroke, Malaysia has also secured Singapore's investment in Iskandar Malaysia, the massive development hub in Johor whose viability, strictly speaking, very much depends on Singapore making the first big move for others to follow.

Najib said the agreement he reached with Lee was historic, and "we see the light at the end of the
"We are both smiling," he said, while Lee responded by saying, "It is a matter for rejoicing. We've got a good deal and both sides are happy".

This major coup paves the way for the even more meaningful news that a company would be set up before the end of the year to develop six parcels of land totalling 217 hectares, now used purely for railway purposes.

The company, known as M-S Pte Ltd, will see Malaysia's Khazanah Nasional Berhad holding the majority 60 per cent stake and Singapore's Temasek Holdings Limited holding 40 per cent. Khazanah and Temasek are investment companies of both governments, respectively.

If there is such a thing as a win-win situation, this is it.

At the heart of this is the unlocking of the strategic value of these real estates in land-scarce Singapore, land that would otherwise, lie idle, simply because of the railway station and the tracks all the way to the station.

Lee alluded to this point when he said: "This matter really cannot wait indefinitely, because it is already 20 years. And there are many development projects in Singapore which have been held up because the POA has not been implemented as it should have, many years ago.

"If you can't solve this, how can you talk about new things? But we can solve this and we are talking about new things," said Lee, who also spoke of the many alternative centres growing in Asia, and where both countries need to work together bilaterally.

Given the backdrop of both leaders being sons of former prime ministers, it is a classic example of political will and common sense at work.

Both are not looking back or being bogged down by the historical baggage and political rhetorics of the past.

"I think it all emanates from a political decision that both of us have taken. That we want the bilateral relations to move forward in a very positive mode, and for that to happen, we would have to settle some of the legacy issues," said Najib.

And he was quick to add: "This is a big legacy issue, and the time has come for resolution".

For reasons few have explained publicly, Malaysia-Singapore ties were going nowhere, particularly during the 22 years until 2003 when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was prime minister.

But it is all water under the bridge now and both prime ministers meet again in a month's time in Malaysia to put the icing on the cake.

Hasmy said: "This will usher in a new dawn in our bilateral relations, one that is forward-looking for the good of our two people who share close bonds of history and culture.

"Our two countries are among the best performing economies with ASEAN and there's no good reason why we cannot iron out our bilateral issues," he said.

If Tun Abdul Razak were alive today, he would certainly be proud of what his son has achieved with Lee Kuan Yew's son.

It is logical to assume that the senior Lee, dubbed the founding father of modern Singapore who is still much in the spotlight as Minister Mentor, is very happy that his son has outshone him for once.

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