
MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE
RELATIONS

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MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE
RELATIONS

Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi



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CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Malaysia-Singapore Relations	9
Discussion	23
Glossary	31
About the Speaker	32

FOREWORD

As the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) enter the 1990s, they will have to deal with the problems of leadership transition as well as changes in both their domestic and international environments. It is therefore an appropriate time for concerned Singaporeans to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the economic, social and political developments in Negara Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

To this end, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) initiated the Regional Speakers Programme in June 1989. Prominent leaders from the other five ASEAN countries were invited to Singapore to deliver lectures and seminars on developments in their countries to a select audience of Singaporeans from the public and private sectors. In view of the tremendous public response to the lectures, the IPS has decided to publish these lectures in order to reach more Singaporeans and to inform them of significant developments in the other ASEAN countries.

The first lecture to be published in the Regional Speakers Lecture series was *Political Developments in Indonesia* which was delivered by Mr Rachmat Witoelar, the Secretary-General of GOLKAR's Central Executive Board. Mr Witoelar was the first speaker to be invited under the IPS Regional Speakers Programme.

The IPS is pleased to publish the second lecture in this series. Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi was the second speaker in the Regional Speakers Programme. He visited Singapore as IPS's guest on 28-29 August 1989 and gave a public lecture on *Malaysia-Singapore Relations* as well as a closed-door seminar on *Malaysian Politics*. We are grateful to Datuk Abdullah for allowing us to publish his lecture. The contents and views expressed in his lecture are his own and do not represent those of the IPS.

Assoc Prof Jon Quah
Acting Director
Institute of Policy Studies

MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE RELATIONS

by Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi

I would like to thank the Institute of Policy Studies for giving me this honour to speak to all of you. I have decided that I should speak on the subject of Malaysia-Singapore relations because I believe it is on the top of the agenda of our many mutual concerns. The subject is a good one because it is what the men in the street talk about. Traders talk about it and also casual labourers commuting between Johore Bahru and Singapore. The businessmen talk about it and so do our leaders, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir. It is a subject very close to our hearts. Having decided on the topic, however, I thought it would be easy to speak on it but it has turned out now that it is a subject which can be difficult to tackle. I have to decide, first of all, how I should approach the subject. I am aware that I am not a diplomat and the Acting High Commissioner of Malaysia is here. I am not an academic nor a businessman. I am just an ordinary politician and an UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) leader who is as much concerned about Malaysia-Singapore relations as any one of you. I am also a member of the Barisan Nasional Supreme Council. The Barisan Nasional, as a party, is equally concerned about Malaysia-Singapore relations. So I want to speak as an UMNO leader who considers Malaysia-Singapore relations as one that can both be potentially burdensome or comfortable, depending on how we manage it.

Then, I had to decide on how long I would take to speak on this subject. The question uppermost in my mind was whether I would be allowing questions or not. If I do not want you to ask me questions, I can talk for the next two hours but that will be impossible, I think. I would bore you to death. I do not want this to be a monologue in which I alone speak and you do not. I would want you to comment on what I have said. If you do want to ask questions, I will try to answer the questions. If the questions are on sensitive issues, I may avoid answering those questions. The brief interaction between us, however, will be useful for you and me.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I often liken Malaysia's relations with Singapore or Singapore-Malaysia relations, it does not matter which comes first, as one between neighbours living in semi-detached houses, sharing a common wall and roof. So, whatever happens on one side affects the other. One neighbour may come home from a party one night and at midnight probably, filled with zest and energy and enthusiasm, decide that since he is not ready for sleep, he should put up the paintings he has just acquired. He and his wife start banging on the wall in order to put up their beautiful paintings, waking up the neighbour next door as a result. Well, it is his right to do so. It should not be the concern of the neighbour. Yet, should he continue with this behavior, without considering the needs and sensitivity of the neighbour, then he might just end up turning the neighbour into a less than friendly friend.

You may ask why Malaysians are so sensitive. Perhaps, even emotional about what happens in Singapore. After all, Malaysia also shares a common border with Thailand. Yet the Malaysians do not get uptight or publicly emotional about the fate of the Malays in southern Thailand and about the American presence in that country. It is a fact that relations between Malaysia and Singapore have been underlined by a certain degree of competitiveness, tension and sometimes, even hostility.

I need not go into the details of our common heritage or history and the pains of separation to explain the peculiar nature of our relations. We have been two separate political entities for well over twenty years now. But our continuous social, cultural and personal links have made the relationship between our two countries a symbiotic one. It is a special relationship and this is an inescapable fact. Thus, it is also a fundamental fact of life that politically we must also be very good friends and neighbours and recognise each other's sensitivities. To many Singaporeans, Malaysia is their ancestral land. I think half the members of your Cabinet originated from Malaysia. For many Singaporeans, Malaysia is where their parents, grandparents or relatives are from and where they still continue to live. There is, therefore, a sense of brotherhood on the part of Malaysians about what happens to their kind in Singapore, and vice versa. It is because we are that close we have become sensitive about our relationship. Whatever happens in Singapore affects Malaysia and the reverse is also true.

You may remember the anger, sound and fury in Malaysia over the Herzog visit. Malaysia saw Singapore's invitation to Herzog as reflecting a lack of sensitivity towards its Muslim neighbours. A few months later, there was another uproar in Malaysia when Lee Hsien Loong spoke, perhaps too frankly, about the role of Singapore Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces. Whatever the motive was, the question was whether it was necessary to make a public statement touching on the loyalties of Singapore Malays or for allowing the visit of the Israeli president at the expense of good relations between two special neighbours. Of course, we do recognise the fact that Singapore is an independent country. Just as we do not want you to interfere in our domestic affairs, neither should we interfere in your domestic affairs and your sovereign right to do what is in your national interest. Again, let me stress the point about our symbiotic relationship. We cannot divorce ourselves from the emotional attachment or the historical and cultural linkages which exist between us.

Malaysia is an open society. In spite of all the accusations that we are undemocratic, opposition parties, public interest groups, political party factionalism and critical and often biased reporting thrive. There is a limit on government control over them. There is anger and concern when Singapore is perceived, whether rightly or wrongly, to be doing things against the interests of Malays and Malaysia. At the same time, there are also many politicians and political parties who have no qualms about exploiting incidents like the Herzog visit to further their own interests. An anti-Singapore bandwagon is a popular vehicle in Malaysia because it often involves race and religion and therefore has tremendous emotional appeal. Meanwhile, the top Malaysian leadership cannot ignore public sentiments and the government has to be seen to be taking some action over issues that are important to the Malaysians and the Malays in particular, like Israel and the Singaporean Malays.

I want to speak frankly here as I think that it is important and fundamental for us to understand each other's sensitivities. Let us look at the latest issues, one of which is Singapore's offer to host United States military facilities. I have been told that this is a very sensitive issue and I should not talk about it. Yet, I think that one must have the courage to talk about sensitive issues affecting us. Our gut reaction is: where is the threat coming from? I speak of the reaction of ordinary Malaysians, people whom I meet and with

whom I have dialogue sessions. Do the Soviets pose the threat or the Vietnamese? A threat posed by the Soviets would require the Americans and United States presence. Or is it meant for us? That is a dangerous question to pose. When one looks at the official speeches on Singapore defence, there is constant reference to threats coming from irrational leaders and extremist forces. Many Malaysians cannot help but feel that the Singaporean leadership may be referring to Malaysia or perhaps Indonesia too, and what it sees as a threat from the forces of Islam or Malay nationalism. Singapore is already the most densely defended country in the world. When you express the wish to host US facilities here, we perceive that you regard us as a threat to your existence and stability. We see the offer is directed as a deterrent to us. You are telling us that you see in this area a sea of hostile Malays surrounding you and your warning is "Hey, do not meddle with us, we have the Americans behind us." We feel a little hurt, a little suspicious of your intentions and motives and doubt your sense of commitment to ASEAN and Zopfan as well as your sense of good neighbourliness. Thus the vocal reaction from Malaysia — although the Malaysian leadership may not necessarily share the same sentiment.

Now, rationally speaking, many people do not think that the US presence in Singapore significantly affects the security of Malaysia. Some would argue that it in fact enhances the security of Malaysia. While we may believe this to be so, it is politically unacceptable. This appears to be the official stand. Firstly, Malaysia is very committed to Zopfan. We are aware that the superpowers have not recognised Zopfan. That does not mean that we should just forget it because it is not going to work without superpower guarantees. Zopfan is an ideal we should aspire to. We should be working towards decreasing foreign military presence, not increasing it or spreading it around more equitably. Secondly, we are very committed to the non-aligned movement and the principles of non-alignment. We cannot agree to the setting up of a military base so near to us. Again, let me bring up the point of living in a semi-detached house. If we do not want it in our compound, we will not be very happy if our next-door neighbour acquires it. We also do not want to be seen to be condoning such a move.

It has happened that every time there has been a political controversy, cooler heads have prevailed at the top and we have been able to resolve the problem. The reason for our being able to

patch up has been the closeness and the comfortable and personal friendship that our leaders at the top share, be it in the government or the private sector. There is a dependable old boys' network that can be called on for favour or help, understanding, and give and take. This older generation of graduates from Raffles College and the University of Malaya in Singapore, however, is fast fading from the scene. In their place is a new generation of leaders who have not gone through the same shared experience of collegial life with the sense of camaraderie. This newly-emerging leadership will not share the same kind of understanding of our unique relationship or the inevitability of our common destiny. I am quite concerned about this development because the new generation is more nationalistic. The new leaders went through separate educational systems and have little sense of our shared history and of the understanding of the crucial need for us to work together. Thus, they may quibble over pebbles, not realising that it is more important to take care of the mountain, which would in the long term be for the common good of all. I would like both sides to look seriously at encouraging more contact among the younger generation of leaders, not only at the official level but also the unofficial and informal levels. This is important for the well-being of both Singapore and Malaysia.

Let me now touch on some other issues that are of common concern to us too — religion and race. If I may be permitted to say so, Islam is more important to the Malays than Buddhism is to the Chinese in Singapore. Islam as *ad-deen*, which means religion, does not recognise separation of State and church. Islam is a complete way of life and everything a Muslim does is in the service of Allah and that which we call *ibadat*. We Muslims consider that providing a good government, building schools, roads and hospitals, ensuring that the people have jobs and enough food to eat are all part of our *ibadat*, our services to Allah and our faith as good Muslim leaders. While we do not label everything that we do as Islamic, this does not mean that the government is not Islamic in the things it is doing. Certainly, the good that the government does in providing for the well-being of the people is very much a part of its commitment to Islam. I hope that you will understand our policy better in this context. The policy I refer to is the Islamisation policy which emphasises the inculcation of Islamic values. This policy has created a lot of misunderstanding. The foreigners' perception of this policy has been negative.

Religion has a very strong appeal for the Malays. This has its advantages and disadvantages. The leadership can turn to religion to sanction the changes it wants to bring about, but irresponsible leaders could also use Islam to further their own personal and political interests. We like to compare our stand with that of PAS (Parti Islam). We say that PAS makes use of religion for its politics. The UMNO says we make use of politics to serve our religion. The UMNO leadership today opposes strongly any form of religious extremism, whether it comes from Iran or Trengganu. Our process of Islamisation emphasises the inculcation of Islamic values which are also the values that are universally accepted, like hard work, discipline, honesty, trustworthiness and accountability. We have established Islamic institutions in banking, insurance and pawnbroking. This is to prove that Islam is a dynamic and progressive religion as well as to provide alternatives to those who feel more comfortable dealing with such institutions rather than those they see as secular.

Islam believes in social justice. A good Muslim cannot be a tyrant and is taught to respect the rights of others. A good Muslim is accountable to his Creator. The good Muslim does not cheat because to be punished in this world is nothing but to be punished in the hereafter means unthinkable pain. We in UMNO would like to assign a role to religion which will propel the development of the Malays because we know that the Malays can be motivated by religious imperatives.

Islam has tremendous respect for knowledge and initiative. The Prophet Muhammad, SAW, has said that we should search for knowledge if it takes us to China. China was very far away from Medina in those days so you can imagine the meaning of the prophet's advice. It also means that we Muslims regard knowledge as a gift of God and that the whole universe is a source of knowledge.

Islam has no objections to doing business. In fact Prophet Muhammad, SAW, had also said that much of our wealth was to be found in business. His beloved first wife, Khadijah, was a very successful businesswoman.

Islam believes that there is no compulsion in religion — for you, your religion; for me, my religion. Islamic history has shown that Muslims and non-Muslims have coexisted peacefully and worked together for the common good. For as long as we are in power, that is, UMNO in Barisan Nasional, rest assured that the Islam we follow

is the Islam of moderation and enlightenment. That, we believe, is the true Islam.

Now, let us move to race relations. In both countries, Chinese-Malay relations are still a delicate and sensitive issue. In both countries, political stability and economic prosperity are dependent on how we manage this potential source of conflict. Our symbiotic relationship means that whatever happens in one country affects the other. If the Malaysian government were to adopt a policy that would be perceived as being against the interest of the Chinese community then, of course, Singapore would be concerned at such a development. We would not know your reaction but concerned, I am sure, you would be. The reverse would apply to Malaysia. We would feel the same way; we too would be concerned about the interests of the Malays and any policy that would act against them. It can be expected that the response in Malaysia would be far more vociferous.

While the Barisan Nasional dominates the political system, we do not enjoy the same kind of influence and control that the PAP wields in Singapore. Opposition parties thrive in Malaysia and so do numerous interest groups. Have you read the kinds of scurrilous remarks they make about us in the tabloids? The government often comes under very strong attack and public pressure to which it has to respond. Even the weak exchange rate between the ringgit and the Singapore dollar became an issue to the opposition parties. In the by-election of Ampang Jaya, this was one of the favourite issues raised by the opposition. They cited it as an example of the mismanagement of the economy, accusing us of being less efficient and not as good at managing the economy as the Singaporeans. According to the opposition, we are doing so badly but they have failed to notice that our ringgit has strengthened against the US dollar and the British pound. That does not matter and what happens in Singapore is more important. You seem to be the yardstick against which we are measured.

This is what I mean about the sensitiveness of the relationship. Sometimes there is hostility and strong competitiveness so we go through this gamut of feelings. In spite of all this, I would like to assure our friends here that the Malaysian government is led by level-headed, moderate leaders. The leadership knows how far it should allow any mobilisation of popular support behind a communal issue. Time and time again, when others have predicted that we

were on the brink of another 13 May 1969, we have shown to the world our resilience and good sense and above all, our realisation that fundamental to the survival of the country is our ability to work together. Crucial to Malaysia's political survival is the need to compromise, give and take and know when to stop playing to the gallery, thereby arousing unbridled communal passions. We have a long-established tradition of going behind closed doors to consult, bargain and compromise on divisive issues. We will continue to solve our problems and conflicts in this manner. This is what we refer to as the *mesyuarat*. It has become the most important tool in the management of race relations in our country.

UMNO does not believe in working for a government made up of a single race. Dr Mahathir, our Prime Minister, declared this particular point very recently, when he declared open the MIC Convention. If we want to, we can form a federal government on our own. We, however, believe in sharing power. We are realistic and know that the need for legitimacy and stability to govern a multi-racial country like Malaysia requires us to share power with the non-Malays. We are committed to the Barisan Nasional concept of power-sharing. Singapore need not fear whatever is going to happen to the Chinese here because they are represented in the government and they have a say in what goes on in the country. I strongly believe that the Barisan Nasional is the best answer to race politics in Malaysia. Although the DAP is constitutionally a multi-racial party, it is in reality a Chinese-based party. So is Gerakan. Even the Parti Rakyat is now largely a Malay-based party. This is the unfortunate thing. Even with the objective of having multi-racial members, somehow, at some stage in the struggle, the parties have become political parties representing a single race. UMNO is, of course, a Malay-based political party but one that believes in working with others even though it has the strength to stand on its own. This is because we know that the price of going it alone is very costly. Ever since Independence and the politics of the Alliance Party, Malaysians have been made to believe and have become committed to inter-racial party cooperation. This is the only way for us to go. For as long as we adhere to these principles of cooperation within the Barisan Nasional framework, parliamentary democracy and one man, one vote, we have strong safeguards against the rise of any racial or religious extremist to our top leadership. Such people are in no position to manage the delicate race relations of our country or to

manage the sensitive relations between our two countries. Just as you fear the rise of such a leader, so do we — except that we know ourselves better and we are confident that such a day will not come as there is no room for such a leader in Malaysia.

Let me now touch briefly on the New Economic Policy [NEP]. Whatever post-1990 New Economic Policy we will have, there still remains the need to provide assistance to the *bumiputra*, the Malays, so that they can do better economically, and to redress the economic imbalance and racial disparity. It is a fact that today, in spite of many years of our independence, we still have this equation of Malay equals poverty. Poverty is still regarded as a Malay phenomenon. Of course, we do not rule out the fact that there are also pockets of poverty among the other communities. There are also poor Chinese, Indians and others. The Malays as a group, however, are left behind economically.

We have done a lot to improve the position of the Malays, especially through education. A lot more, however, needs to be done. The present leaders are committed to the correction of the racial and economic imbalance. The Malays' corporate share today is just about 20 per cent. We hope to achieve 30 per cent. I do not think we can do it since we have only another couple of years to go. We suffered a long period of economic recession, the longest we have experienced so far, and because of that we were not able to do as much as we wanted to. So we must continue our efforts to correct this economic disparity or imbalance in our economy. The reason is obvious. We do not want to bequeath to the coming generations of Malaysians a society that is plagued with racial disparity, economic imbalance and the consequent tension and conflict. The founding fathers of our Independence saw this when they met in 1970; that was after the 13 May riot. They all agreed that something must be done to correct this economic imbalance that exists between the Malays and non-Malays. Otherwise we will be heading for disaster. The *laissez-faire* situation that existed before 1969 could not be allowed to exist after that. We need growth; we must have high growth, as high as possible, but we must have growth with distribution. That is the most important basis of the New Economic Policy which has been in implementation for almost twenty years now. We are painfully aware that these issues are very racial. We are aware that racial politics will continue to dominate but the starting step has to be taken to redress this imbalance. We have to be aggressive in

implementing our policies now because a *laissez-faire* approach, as I have mentioned earlier, cannot correct these imbalances. In fact, it may enhance or cause the gap to widen. The Malays are in a situation where economically they have fewer quality opportunities. I use the words "quality opportunities" with respect to progress. This is because of a long history of deprivation. The British government then was concentrating its development in the urban areas. Historically, there were more non-Malays in the urban areas. It was in these urban areas that quality opportunities to progress were available. The best schools in the country are in the urban areas. I remember way back in 1951 when I went to an English school for a secondary education because there was no secondary education available in my village or anywhere within a radius of ten miles. In some places on the east coast then, there was no secondary education available even within a radius of 50 or 100 miles.

Our occupation is mainly agriculture. How do you develop agriculture? How far can you go with agricultural development? There are serious limits to growth when you talk about agricultural development. A plot of land cannot continue to increase its product forever. There are serious limits. A farmer never thinks of increasing his acreage and farm lot. He has no money in the first place and furthermore, all the farms already belong to somebody else. But if you are a businessman, you may start as a hawker, then you become a petty trader, eventually a small businessman and finally, a big businessman. The opportunity to expand the business is tremendous. The opportunity to expand the farming activity in the ricefield is seriously limited and it is for this reason that in our New Economic Policy, we have policies to restructure society. We do not want the Malays to be forever *padi*-farmers. We would also want them to be businessmen like their Chinese friends. We want them to feel that they are a part of the mainstream of economic activity, that they are not left out and left in the villages, poor, deprived, alienated, without quality opportunities to improve themselves.

I have many times placed emphasis on quality opportunities. We have educational opportunities and students now can go to school because they are schools everywhere. They do not, however, have access to quality education like the students who are in the urban areas. It is for this reason that the government has embarked on massive programmes to provide quality education in the rural areas, sending out good teachers and providing better facilities.

The New Economic Policy has sometimes been seriously misunderstood. It has been perceived as a policy that discriminates against non-Malays, which is not true. If it was so, the non-Malay leaders then participating in the National Consultative Council, which was responsible for the foundation of the New Economic Policy, would not have agreed to it. They would not have agreed to a policy which aims at discriminating against any one group or any one racial group in the country. When we talk of poverty within the context of the implementation of the New Economic Policy, the eradication of poverty is irrespective of race. We are not just concerned with the poverty of the Malays alone. We are equally concerned with the poverty of all communities. Poverty, wherever it exists, must be eradicated because we do not want to see — and I do not think our leaders would want to see — poverty becoming an issue and being exploited by irresponsible political leaders to advance their political interests, in support of whatever political motives they might have. We do not want the poverty of the people to be a political football.

These are serious problems that we have to solve as we know that the issues of poverty and Malay economic backwardness are popular and emotional issues that can create tension and are easily exploited. We must continue to be aggressive in implementing policies to eradicate poverty and to restructure society while we still enjoy the political power which provides stability and some degree of economic prosperity. The New Economic Policy is an ambitious programme that can only be achieved with intense political will and strength. You may not want to believe it but let me state that the New Economic Policy is not a programme that deliberately wants to discriminate against non-Malays.

The intention to discriminate was certainly never in the minds of the founding fathers of the New Economic Policy. The overriding need was to eradicate poverty, and to eliminate the glaring disparity and economic imbalance between the Malays and non-Malays, and the urban and rural areas and to break down the compartmentalisation of race with economic function. We have been compartmentalised for a long time. We always think of Indians as estate or Public Works Department labourers. Fortunately for many Indians today, they have moved up the social ladder and many young Indians are professionals — lawyers, doctors, engineers. So are the Malays too. Many Malays today are engineers and professionals

but the Malay professionals constitute only about 20 per cent of the community of professionals. It is a very small proportion that we have achieved, after so many years of Independence. We have just gone through a major trauma and we realise that if we do not embark on this massive programme of redress, this issue will once again explode in our faces. This imbalance and inequality is dangerous to our long-term political survival. That is why, in the short term, we are willing to pay the price of a certain degree of discontent and loss of popularity. But we do know that all fair-minded Malaysians are on our side and understand the history and philosophy behind the New Economic Policy. Their choice of our party, Barisan Nasional, in all the general elections we have held, is strong testimony of this support.

Now we have what we popularly refer to as the MAPEN, *Majlis Perundingan Ekonomi Negara*, or the National Economic Consultative Council, of which I am a member. I think I am very fortunate to be a member of this council. In 1970, when the NEP was being conceived, I was just an official, not able to say anything, merely having to sit, record the various discussions that took place, and assist my senior officials in providing an efficient secretariat for the National Consultative Council. Then for thirteen years as a civil servant, I was charged with the responsibility of implementing a lot of its projects. Now I have been given the chance to review this policy in the present Consultative Council. It is a council that is made up of Malaysian leaders from all walks of life and various strata of society. Farmers, fishermen, labourers and workers are represented. So are professionals and academics; they too have their representatives, as do all the political parties, whether in government or opposition. We have constituted the members in such a way as to provide a 50-50 balance with 50 Malays and 50 non-Malays. We could certainly create a council made up of members who are all supporters. If the government so wishes, it could dispense with the need for such a council. It can proceed on its own. It has all the experts in the EPU (Economic Planning Unit), the Treasury, and Statistics Department and it can draw experts from the Bank Negara, the National Bank. It can draw experts from anywhere it wants. However, we decided, as we did in 1970, to give the Malaysian leaders representing the various strata of society an opportunity to make their contributions to the formation of an economic policy for the 1990s and beyond. What it is going to be, I am in no position to

indicate to you at the moment. It could be called the New New Economic Policy. In the Council, however, there is very intense debate and discussion. I find it extremely useful and beneficial. We have no pressmen around nor gallery so there are none of our followers hanging around to listen to evaluate our performance. We can say anything and we pull no punches because we regard this very unique and special role given to us as very important. It is a responsibility that we have to discharge very well because the nation would expect us to do so.

The nation would want an economic policy that can ensure continuing progress for the nation, that can build the Malaysian nation into a united nation and take Malaysia into the next century, confident of its ability to face the new challenges. There have been accusations that it is merely some kind of political stunt. Even my Malay supporters have asked whether it is a move to stop the issues being discussed publicly. It is no such thing. Those who are in that group would want all their views, findings, fears, criticisms, objections and hopes for the future to go on record. It is this feeling that has become the driving force in the NECC. The government cannot choose to ignore its reports.

This is not just a political facade put up to hide some of the serious political problems. No, this is a genuine exercise in *mesyuarat* and I hope that it comes out with something that will be good for all Malaysians. Many Singaporean friends are asking me, "Hey, Abdullah, what is happening there? There is already the Economic Policy we have to cope with. Why are you coming out with another one?" Any development that is happening across the causeway, political or economic, would be of major concern to you. You are one of our biggest investors, number three, I think. Dr Lim Chong Yah would know. For one year, sir, I was your student but I flunked my statistics so I had to read Islamic studies. Professor Yip Yat Hoong is to be blamed for failing me. I tell you it was one of the best choices I have ever taken because today everyone is hurrying to learn about Islam, fundamentalism, extremism, what the Prophet says and what the Koran says. I thank the Lord I have been so many years ahead of them.

Singapore has so many investments across the causeway in Johore. Johore is your favourite place. Singaporeans go to Johore. The positions of Woodlands and Johore have changed now. They switched. We spent a lot of money in Woodlands. Why can't you

spend money in Johore Bahru now? When you decided on a half-tank rule, my reaction was uncontrollable laughter, I do not know why.

I have told you about what is happening in Kuala Lumpur because I realise that you are very concerned about the New Economic Policy and economic initiatives that we are going to take there. After all, 1990 is not very far away. Investment plans take a long time to mature. You have spent a lot of money and you have a lot of business interests in Kuala Lumpur so you are interested. I stress that whatever comes out of that National Economic Consultative Council will be a sum total of the contributions of all concerned, responsible Malaysians who want our country to progress and to live peacefully with our neighbours. When all is said and done, I hope and I am sure Malaysia will remain a resilient society. From the time of our independence, the popular prediction that our country will fall apart has come to nought.

After the traumatic May 1969 riots, we have bounced back and more predictions of further racial upheavals following tense situations have also come to nought. This is because we have followed a prudent path. We believe in negotiations and compromise. I would like to assure you once again that on our side of the semi-detached house, the children, though sometimes robust, are well looked-after by fathers who are responsible. We do not think anyone is about to go mad or behave irrationally. You can certainly enjoy the security and goodwill of a friendly, rational and responsible neighbour. Thank you.

DISCUSSION

1. *Question:* Your Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad has talked about general elections being held very soon. In the last three days he has spoken three times on the issue. Can you comment on this?

Datuk Abdullah: I am supposed to comment on why the Prime Minister in the last three days spoke on general elections? Obviously he wants us to be prepared for the elections which will be held. Obviously, I wish I knew when so I could prepare my constituency for the elections. If you study the history of Malaysian elections, every time we completed our third year and are going into the fourth year, we talked about elections, without fail. That is one point you may wish to remember. The second point you may wish to remember is that all our general elections have been held in the fourth year of our term of office. That is also a fact. I am not making a guess here. So now the Prime Minister is reminding us about the elections but when they'll take place I do not know. The statement that he has made in so many places — in Kelantan I think — that now we enjoy economic prosperity, now there is a measure of political stability and UMNO has been completely rehabilitated, means that he believes that if we go for election between now and April 1991, we will win. So the point that we will win is a very important point. The government will hold a general election only if the party can win. So it can happen any time.

2. *Question:* I refer to your comment about the non-discriminatory nature of the New Economic Policy. Although the common perception is that we are only separated by a causeway less than a mile long, the political centre of Malaysia is 250 miles away and, except for those of us who commute regularly, we do not feel the pulse that accurately and some of my comments may be coloured by this and a little biased. The question I would like to pose to you is

whether your perception about the non-discriminatory nature of the New Economic Policy is widely shared among the non-Malays. We do get some reports, not all of which are accurate. The areas often talked about are to do with the real chances of the non-Malays in activities like civil services, banking and insurance, and mining. With the evidence which we have heard, it would be useful if you would comment on whether the actual implementation of the government policy could sustain the claim about non-discrimination and also whether your non-Malay colleagues in the National Economic Consultative Committee have a view on this.

Datuk Abdullah: Yes, this happens to be one of the very serious issues raised at the discussions we had in the National Economic Consultative Council. I am not supposed to be telling you what happens at the council because that is off the record, but on the basis of the need to know, I would certainly concur that this is a major issue and everyone talks about it. Now when you talk of the New Economic Policy, you talk of the New Economic Policy in terms of what happens in the public sector but certainly the intention of the New Economic Policy is not that it be implemented only in the public sector. The intention is also to implement it in the private sector. It is an implementation that involves the participation of all. That point has to be borne in mind because at this stage of our discussion there is a lot of concentration on government performance and government implementation of the New Economic Policy. This suggests that in the minds of the people the implementation of the New Economic Policy is only the concern of the government, not anybody else's, and that is certainly not true.

When you refer to the situation in the various government services, there is the imbalance that we are endeavouring to correct. There are pockets of concentration of Malays in some services and non-Malays in other services. We inherited a situation in which the public service enjoys a very strong and high level of participation of Malays, and a private sector in which there is a high-level participation of non-Malays. This situation still exists today. So how do we correct this situation? The question is how do we redress this situation and what can we do to admit civil servants on a basis which reflects a better composition of Malaysians of different ethnic origins. The need for this has been very strongly and emphatically stressed at the National Economic Consultative Council discussions. It is very serious.

We have taken a very serious view of this and it is certainly not the intention of the government to go on record or to create an image of being a discriminatory government or a government that practises discrimination. The Prime Minister has on many occasions already stressed this point.

3. *Question:* You comment that among the professionals in the private sector only 22 per cent are Malays. I was wondering whether you took into calculation that this might just happen, that there is a zero sum game here. If you have a certain number of Malays, given the attraction and the security of the civil service to which they can get easy entrance, there must necessarily be fewer Malay professionals in the private sector. The converse of this also happens in the private sector where non-Malay professionals, who cannot get into the civil service, end up. So then, there must be a consequent preponderance of non-Malays in the private sector. These things become a corollary of your policy in terms of your civil service recruitment rather than any reluctance or structural opposition to getting the Malays into the private sector.

Datuk Abdullah: That is the debatable point. As you have said, the other argument is that, because you cannot get there, the door this side has to be opened. Then again, the Malay students for many years did not have the opportunity for education in areas needed by the private sector. It was only since MARA came into being that quality opportunities were given to them. Otherwise, no. In those early days, the days when I was at university, the percentage of the Malays there was still small, about 10 to 15 per cent, and most of them were doing Arts subjects. Coming from schools where there were no good science laboratories, the students could not study pure sciences. This situation also affected the non-Malays in the same schools. My old school, Bukit Mertajam High School, of which Dr Chandran, who is here, is an old boy, is a good example. He was one year my senior and our school then did not have such facilities. Those boys in the Penang Free School were being taught pure sciences. We were not. If we had had the facilities, probably Dr Chandran might not have become a historian. He might be a doctor or physicist. It is certainly not planning that gets us into this situation. I cannot imagine a private employer wanting graduates of Malay studies or Islamic studies, geographers or historians. I never tried to

apply in the first place. I wanted to be a politician all the time. The private sector would want students doing other more relevant subjects. Now we want to redress this situation. Of course, I must admit that the government recruitment policy has a major role in terms of providing employment for the public sector and what happens on the government side will affect the situation on the non-government side. If we were taking all Malays in, then of course, as you say, there would be not enough Malays in the private sector. Of course that argument is valid but at the moment there are also many Malays who are graduates in subjects relating to Economics and Accountancy and are still looking for jobs. This is our concern at the moment.

4. *Question:* This is regarding the facilities which Singapore is thinking about at the moment for the United States forces; you alluded to this in your presentation saying that Malaysia was a little hurt, a little suspicious. Knowing the Malay psyche a little bit, I think this "littleness" is a big offence to Malaysia. My question here is if, for some reason, Singapore were to continue proceeding with this proposal, what will be the Malaysian response?

Datuk Abdullah: I think that question is not very relevant now in the light of the latest statement by Mr Ong Teng Cheong that Singapore itself is now thinking again about this. I do not think there is any necessity to react to a question based on an assumption.

5. *Question:* You mention the need for good neighbours to accommodate and tolerate each other. My own view is tolerance and accommodation also suggest the need for a certain degree of reasonableness in relationships. I would like to give one example and see whether you would like to comment on it. Recently you had this incident of the Horsburg Lighthouse. My own analysis again is that the case is very straightforward — Singapore's that is. The record is such, and it has been for a very long time, but Malaysia is making quite a hoo-ha on this point. I regard this as quite unreasonable for a neighbour to do. Finally, would you like to comment on the future of Malaysia-Singapore relations? Although I must concede this could be a ridiculous idea, some have entertained the thought that the reasons for Singapore's merger into Malaysia in the early '60s were as compelling as they are today. Would you

comment on the possibility or would you entertain at all Singapore's merger into Malaysia in the future?

Datuk Abdullah: Like academics, people always want to theorise on a lot of things. On the first subject, there is not as much noise as you thought there was. Not as much noise as that relating to the United States naval base. I have been told that the subject is now under discussion between Singapore and Malaysia. I would not know of the outcome but the most important thing is this: there is a discussion going on. That is what we want and the thing we would most like to see. We will not solve problems by allowing mobsters in the street to pressurise the government or to dictate to the government the policies it must take. That is not happening. We do not have mobs in the street pressurising the government to take any particular action on this issue. Our leaders have agreed that there must be a discussion on this subject. This is the spirit of *mesyuarat* that we must maintain and this must become a tradition, a tradition that exists between Malaysia and Singapore. Both countries should uphold the tradition of *mesyuarat* on issues that are sensitive to our peoples. I hope they will come up with something that is to the satisfaction of both sides. As I told you earlier, sometimes reactions to issues like this are inevitable at the level of people who may not know enough about them. The most important thing is, however, a leader's reaction to the particular issue. Here, we prefer to take it to the discussion table.

On the second subject, I do not think there will be and I cannot see a day when Singapore would want to take a step and say "yes, we want to merge with Malaysia". This exercising of the mind for a little excitement is, pardon the expression, like mental masturbation that is not productive.

6. **Question:** I have some difficulty with your analogy of Singapore and Malaysia as two semi-detached houses. I would have thought that what you have is actually a sprawling bungalow and a very small terraced house alongside each other. Given this vast difference in the size and potential of both countries, it would appear that, precisely because of Singapore's smallness and its perhaps disproportionate achievement, every action taken by Singapore is, one way or another, instantly conceived of as calculating and devious and since Singapore presumably is not about to grow in size and it will always have to base its calculations — political and military

calculations — on its smallness, perhaps a very general question would be: can this gulf between the two countries ever be fully bridged except on a very superficial business-like level?

Datuk Abdullah: Can the gulf between the two countries be bridged? Why not? Have you any reasons why it cannot be bridged? I think today, as I have been told by many, there is a greater understanding at the higher level of our respective governments on a lot of things happening on both sides of the causeway. The water issue is an example. Well, it will continue to be an issue but I think today there is a better understanding between Dr Mahathir and Mr Lee Kuan Yew. A memorandum of understanding is a reflection of an effort to bridge the gap. I think in the years ahead, *insya-Allah*, we will have a better understanding if we now provide opportunities for contacts between and among the young leaders of our respective countries. Our participation in ASEAN provides the regular contacts and understanding of the common issues and the problems we face in this region. I have always been optimistic and I will continue to be optimistic.

7. **Question:** I am really fascinated by the choice of the word "symbiotic". I think it is a very nice and appropriate word. In Singapore we have seen a very good example of the success in symbiotic relationships in the relationship between the labour movement and the Singapore government. We have seen the success of it but if we were to look back into history, we also see the problems related with a symbiotic relationship. In terms of economic development, the symbiotic relationship, I think, is easier to achieve with pragmatic simple sense, common sense, dollars and cents too. But what would you see as possible minefields in terms of achieving this economic symbiotic relationship before we actually come to the manna, the fruit of our labour? I think a more difficult area of symbiotic relationship would be in the field which you described as race and religion, the primordial areas. If you look at race relations both in Malaysia and Singapore, as you pointed out just now, it will continue to be one very difficult area to manage. To quote another Datuk, another Datuk Abdullah too, who made a speech in Singapore....

Datuk Abdullah: Datuk Abdullah Kok Lanas?

Question (contd): Yes, he was very pointed when he said that Singapore, meaning Chinese Singapore, should not give any semblance of hope to the Malaysian Chinese and we will not do the same for Singapore Malays. I am paraphrasing him. It was also said that Singapore Chinese have less interest in the Malaysian Chinese compared to Malaysian Malay interest for Singapore Malays meaning the interest is more acute in terms of what happens to Malays in Singapore. Can I have your comment in terms of helping the Singapore Malays develop greater integration and stability. Is it a problem, in fact, when Malaysian Malays look to Singapore Malays as a big brother or the reverse, the Singapore Malays look to Malaysian Malays as a big brother? Will this complicate matters further and mean that it will take a longer process for the Malays to evolve a sense of belonging and a passion for Singapore?

Datuk Abdullah: I would simply put it this way. I did mention in my speech that the basis of our relationship today is recognition of our sovereign rights or the respective sovereign rights. Singapore is an independent country. So is Malaysia, which means Singapore must have its own policies to ensure its survival and its continuing progress and likewise Singapore knows that we too must have our own policies. We would not want to interfere with what is happening in your house nor do we expect that you should interfere with what is happening in our house. But, at the same time, we understand the reality of our relationship. This we understand well. Speaking as a Malay, I would not want to do anything that could make it difficult for the Malays of Singapore to integrate truly into the Singapore society. We would not want to do things which suggest in any way that the Malays of Singapore have a second loyalty across the causeway. You have to look after your own survival as you must because you are Singapore citizens. How you will shape your destiny depends on you. Your destiny is in your hands. Of course, as you know very well, you cannot prevent us from feeling in certain ways about what happens here as far as the Malaysian situation goes. The most important thing is, however, what we do when we feel that way. The action following this feeling is important. I do not think we should interfere although inevitably we may sympathise. There is this kind of kinship that we cannot eliminate. I am also sure that the non-Malays of Singapore, the Chinese of Singapore, will feel in the same way if they see certain things happening across the causeway

up north to the Chinese there. There is no way that we can prevent them from feeling that way.

Our concern is, however, what Singapore would do as a result, just as you are also concerned about what Malaysia would do as well. For so long, we have known that it is important that we maintain a good relationship. As long as we understand that any problem or trouble across the causeway on one side can affect the other side and as long as we have leaders who are responsible, level-headed and not irrational, I think the leaders will be able to have a very steady and firm hand on this relationship between Singapore and Malaysia without allowing public pressures on either side to destroy that. This is the best guarantee. Coming back to my suggestions earlier, it is most important that the leaders first must understand the issues. Ordinary people sometimes do not care much about politics. There is travel that goes on from Singapore to Johore and the reverse. There is fairly regular contact. Sometimes these people are quite oblivious to politics. Sometimes they react quite aggressively to situations in the two countries, even without involving the leaders in the sense that the leaders have no position on some of the things happening on either side of the causeway. People begin to react. They make comments, they make statements to the press, organise gatherings. This happens but the leaders must be able to control and not respond to pressures for action that, in the end, will just destroy this most valuable relationship that we have with a neighbour.

We want to control our relationship in a way that is mutually beneficial. The relationship can be complementary, though I agree that Singapore, in terms of size, is much smaller than Malaysia. That is size but in terms of its ability, capability, and the contributions it can make, they are tremendous. My reaction would be that it depends on the leadership, really. An anti-Singapore or Singapore-Malaysia issue bandwagon, is a very popular one across there. I do not know what it is here but across the causeway, up north, it is very popular. And the government is always under very severe strain when this happens. Fortunately, we have been able to control the situation. So far, we have enjoyed good a relationship and, *insya-Allah*, we will continue to enjoy this good relationship because trouble is not good for either one of us. What is good is political stability that we enjoy on both sides of the causeway and our mutual prosperity. That is good for all of us. You prosper, you do well, we do well and we will continue to be good neighbours because of that. Thank you very much.

GLOSSARY

- 1 **ASEAN** — Association of Southeast Asian Nations
 - 2 **Barisan Nasional** — National Front (Ruling coalition party)
 - 3 **Insya-Allah** — God Willing
 - 4 **DAP** — Democratic Action Party (Opposition political party)
 - 5 **MAPEN** — *Majlis Perundingan Ekonomi Negara* (National Economic Consultative Council: council formed to shape the New Economic Policy for the 1990s)
 - 6 **MARA** — *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* (Council of Trust for Indigenous Peoples)
 - 7 **MIC** — Malaysian Indian Congress (Political party representing the Indians in Barisan Nasional)
 - 8 **PAP** — People's Action Party (Ruling political party in Singapore)
 - 9 **PMIP/PAS** — Pan-Malayan (Malaysian) Islamic Party or *Parti Islam Se Malaysia* (Opposition Malay political party)
 - 10 **SAW** — *Salallahualaihi Wassalam*, May Allah bless Him (the Prophet Muhammad) and grant Him peace
 - 11 **UMNO** — United Malay National Organisation (Political party representing Malays in Barisan Nasional)
 - 12 **Zopfan** — Zone of peace, freedom and neutrality
- * We are grateful to Dr Leo Suryadinata, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, NUS, for his help in the preparation of the glossary.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, born in November 1939, is the son of a prominent Penang UMNO leader. He was educated in Bukit Mertajam High School, Penang Methodist Boys' School and the University of Malaya, where he received his BA (Hons) in Islamic Studies in 1964. Upon graduation, he joined the Malaysian Civil Service as Assistant Secretary in the Public Services Department. In 1965 he became an UMNO member.

Following the 13 May 1969 racial riots, he was appointed Principal Assistant Secretary of the National Operations Council Secretariat. In 1971 he became Director of Youth, and was subsequently made the Deputy Director-General, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

In 1978 he resigned from the civil service. He contested and won the Kepala Batas (Penang) seat in the general election and was subsequently appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Territory Ministry. He was Minister in the Prime Minister's Department from 1981 to 1984. He was appointed Minister of Education in the cabinet reshuffle of July 1984 and following his election as one of the three UMNO Vice-Presidents. He was appointed Minister of Defence in May 1986. He left the Cabinet in May 1987. Datuk Abdullah was reappointed as an UMNO Vice-President in 1988 when UMNO was reinstated after its deregistration following a court decision declaring it null and void.

He is married to Datin Endon and they have two children.