

# Diplomacy and people power in Southeast Asia

by Chandran Jeshurun

RECENTLY there was a rather wide-ranging and frank discussion of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Indonesia and the growing participation of parliamentarians in determining foreign policy. Dr Dewi Fortima Anwar, the well-known Indonesian academic and policy adviser to former President B.J. Habibie, shared her perspectives at a public lecture at the University of Malaya, my alma mater.

This was a much-needed look at the prevailing levels of regional interaction particularly at the often neglected people-to-people level and public perceptions of the actual state of affairs.

The speaker made it absolutely plain that the so-called myth of *se rumpun* (or common stock) played no part in the formal G-to-G conduct of Malaysia's and Indonesia's individual policies. Equally, she conceded that the "big brother" image of Indonesia in its dealings with a fellow Malay neighbour does not reflect the realities of the present state of regional and international politics.

However, the subject that she articulated rather eloquently was the nature of civil society in Indonesia in the post-Suharto period which is showing increasing signs of a rather free-wheeling popular media culture that those outside the country do not quite comprehend fully. No one in their DPR (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat) or among the burgeoning family of

NGOs in Jakarta today will dare to discourage or stifle popular expression in line with official policy.

We have seen rather startling indications of this new trend in Indonesian society over the past few years when Malaysia has come under heavy fire over a range of issues from disputes over territorial waters to the status of migrant labour. Just the other day Indonesian parliamentarians took grave exception to Singapore Prime Minister Lee's insinuation that Asean should not be held to ransom by the indecision of some members in ratifying the newly launched Asean Charter.

As is well known, Indonesia and the Philippines have not endorsed the document at the legislative level due to creeping suspicions that the Charter was too vague about the human rights issue.

Put more bluntly, the Indonesian lawmakers have questioned the subjugation of their government's stand to the Asean consensus mode of operation. How can a nation of more than 200 million be dictated to by member states of Asean who are mere pip-squeaks, albeit quite affluent ones?

The question that arises here is that, while Malaysian society as a whole may be completely unaware of how things stand in Indonesia as far as the new activism of civil society is concerned, how circumspect should our diplomats be in defending our legitimate interests?

The issue is not peculiar to KL-Jakarta relations as similar challenges to regional solidarity have also been experienced in our relations with Thailand and the Philippines in recent times.

Since the implementation of the new democratic constitution of 1997 in Thailand, civil society in Bangkok and its parliamentarians have never failed to apply pressure on the government in matters concerning bilateral relations with its neighbours.

The so-called People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a motley collection of anti-Thaksin forces,

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played a central role in exposing the Shin Corporation-Temasek deal in 2006. Among other things, it launched a virulent attack on Singapore's perceived insensitivity of Thailand's national security interests.

The Thai media, in particular, exercises a powerful influence on policy-making with its close scrutiny of issues like the on-going volatility in the South.

Malaysia has not been spared in this understandable, even if mistaken, perception that a predominantly Muslim Malaysia is sympathetic, or worse, even supportive of the separatists or

other mal fide elements in the four southern provinces. Surely such a situation places a heavy burden on the freedom of action of Malaysian diplomacy.

Apropos of Thailand, it is quite an eye-opener that the current controversy over the Unesco world heritage listing of the ancient 11th century temple, Khao Phra Vihear, earlier this month has led to its foreign minister being impeached and forced to resign.

All he had done was to merely agree to Cambodia's bid to Unesco as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had awarded the disputed Hindu monument to Cambodia way back in 1962.

Public sentiment in Bangkok, however, was incensed that the government had gone along with the 1962 ICJ decision when the main access to the deity Shiva's hilltop sanctuary was from Thai territory.

Can you believe that the Cambodian government has had to provide special security measures - to the Royal Thai Embassy and Thai business establishments in Phnom Penh for fear of possible retaliation to the protests of the

Thai NGOs? This is the sort of "people power" involvement in regional diplomacy that we have to be increasingly wary of.

Fortunately for all parties, in a mood of unexpected brilliance, the government has appointed one of the country's most talented foreign service officers, Tej Finnag, as its new foreign minister and expectation on both sides are high that he would bring about a mutually acceptable resolution of the crisis.

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disagreements.

Singapore famously indulged in this shrewd stratagem when it decided to publish official correspondence with Kuala Lumpur over its dispute regarding Malaysia's supply of water,

Naturally, the man in the street found himself somewhat entrapped in such shows of "stealing a mai'ch" on your neighbour over some quarrel. The popular Malaysian view of such matters has been mostly very muted given its inability to comprehend the goings-on in its immediate neighbours.

Our diplomats, on the other hand, have their hands full in trying to keep things under control and it has to be acknowledged that Wisma Putra has done us proud in these regional problems. The formal arid public response to the "hu-ha" in Jakarta over the Ambalas problem, for example, was expertly managed by KL.

In view of the drastically changed political landscape in several countries in Southeast Asia it is well to remember the tremendous influence of civil society on national foreign policy options.

Being a relatively new dimension of the prevailing state of regional diplomacy, it is all the more important that our diplomats and media professionals are properly aware of the reality of the situation on the ground, be it in Jakarta, Bangkok or Singapore.

The element of "people power" that first became so pronounced in Manila in the post-Marcos era is now becoming increasingly evident in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Undoubtedly, its impact on the necessarily "quiet" conduct of diplomatic dealings between nations is inevitable and has to be taken into due consideration by the powers that be in our respective foreign offices.

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