

Vast scope for co-operation

Bhaskar Balakrishnan

The Malaysian Prime Minister, Mr Najib Tun Abdul Razak's five-day visit to India (after Saudi Arabia and the UAE) is both timely and opportune. Mr Razak, 56, earlier Deputy Prime Minister and son of Malaysia's second Prime Minister Abdul Razak, has over 30 years of experience in government. He assumed office in April 2009, following the retirement of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. His current visit seeks to promote Malaysia as a gateway for business with Asean and to boost relations with India. The Malaysian delegation includes a large number of Ministers, State Chief Ministers, and businessmen, highlighting the importance of this visit.

Prime Minister Razak entered office with a focus on domestic economic issues and political reforms, at a time of major political turmoil. Badawi had led the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN - National Front) coalition to a landslide victory in March 2004, winning 91 per cent of the seats in the 222-member parliament.

In the March 2008 elections, however, the BN suffered a serious electoral reverse, gaining only 63 per cent of the seats and just 50 per cent of the votes. The opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR - or People's Pact) won 82 seats, challenging the BN's historical dominance in national politics. The Opposition

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won control over 5 States (of 13) and the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur.

Overall, the 2008 elections may have, in fact, strengthened Malaysian democracy, by giving voters a genuine choice, and challenging the BN's performance in government. Both the BN and the PR seek to reach out to the Chinese and Indian communities — a healthy sign.

SIGNIFICANCE OF VISIT

Mr Razak's visit to Chennai underscores the special significance of the large Tamil-speaking community, some 1.8 million, in Malaysia. The use of the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) against groups such as the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) had been seen as damaging the image of the

ruling coalition, despite the presence of the Malaysian Indian Congress. The release of some detainees has improved the climate.

Malaysia with its 28 million people, composed of Malays (65 per cent), Chinese (26 per cent) and Indians (8 per cent), with diverse religions (60 per cent Islam), faces the challenge of integrating this diversity with the need to promote advancement of the living standards of the majority Malay population. It has achieved impressive economic growth, attained a per capita GDP (PPP) of \$14,215, the second highest in the Asean, with forex reserves of \$88 billion, and significant oil and gas reserves.

An extradition treaty and a higher education MoU have been signed during the visit. Indo-Ma-

laysia trade is around \$10 billion, and a comprehensive economic agreement and bilateral FTA are planned to be finalised by end 2010. This should open up more avenues of trade and investment. India is the world's largest importer of palm oil, much of which comes from Malaysia.

Cooperation in Defence, energy, infrastructure building, higher technical education, and knowledge-intensive sectors offers good potential.

The problem of illegal Indian migrants in Malaysia remains a thorny issue. In this context, the bilateral labour agreement of January 2009 should be reviewed, as well as a possible framework for mobility of highly skilled workers. A large number of business to business MOUs are expected to be signed, a healthy sign that B2B linkages between the two countries are flourishing.

COMMON INTERESTS

India and Malaysia share many common interests that could be the foundation of solid strategic cooperation. Both countries are committed to multicultural, multi-religious democracies, though Malaysia gives primacy to the role of Islam, while assuring that other faiths can be freely practised.

Both countries face the problem of assuring respect for the religious and cultural rights of minorities,

and policies for seeking advancement of disadvantaged groups while balancing considerations of equity.

The combat against terrorism and religious extremism is another unifying factor, as is the issue of safe transit of vessels in the seas around both countries. The search for oil and gas worldwide has seen OVL and Petronas work together in far off areas, and this could extend to the Bay of Bengal, considered a promising location for hydrocarbons. Renewable energy, nuclear energy, and combating climate change are also important areas of common interest.

Exchanges of ideas on the future development and interrelationship between various Asian regional cooperation frameworks, the reform of the UN and multilateral institutions, the Non-Aligned Movement, etc., could result in beneficial cooperation. Malaysia, being a moderate member of the OIC, could be a valuable partner.

Keeping all this in view, the scope for cooperation is vast and much could be achieved. Prime Minister Razak's visit could refocus the interest and determination on both sides to energise mutually beneficial strategic cooperation and specific projects of interest and give a new thrust and momentum to bilateral relations.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece.)