

A tribute to four Malaysians

How should young Singaporeans and Malaysians relate to one another? Professor Tommy Koh looks at the issue. Here is the edited text of his speech to the Malaysian alumni of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy yesterday.

I am a contrarian. I observe that Malaysians and Singaporeans like to criticise each other. They seldom praise each other.

I want to be the first Singaporean official to praise not one but four Malaysians. They are:

Tun Mohamed Suffian, a distinguished judge and former Lord President of the Federal Court of Malaysia, who dedicated his life to the promotion and protection of the rule of law.

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, former secretary-general of the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

Datuk Albert Talalla (Bertie to his friends), who has had a long and successful career in Malaysia's diplomatic service.

Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, a former diplomat who has been Yang di-Pertua Negeri (governor) of Penang since May 1 this year.

1 MOHAMED SUFFIAN: A MAN OF INTEGRITY

I came to know Tun Mohamed Suffian in 1961 when I sat my final exams at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Law School, then known as the University of Malaya, in Singapore.

Final-year students were examined by both our teachers and a panel of external examiners, who we found truly intimidating.

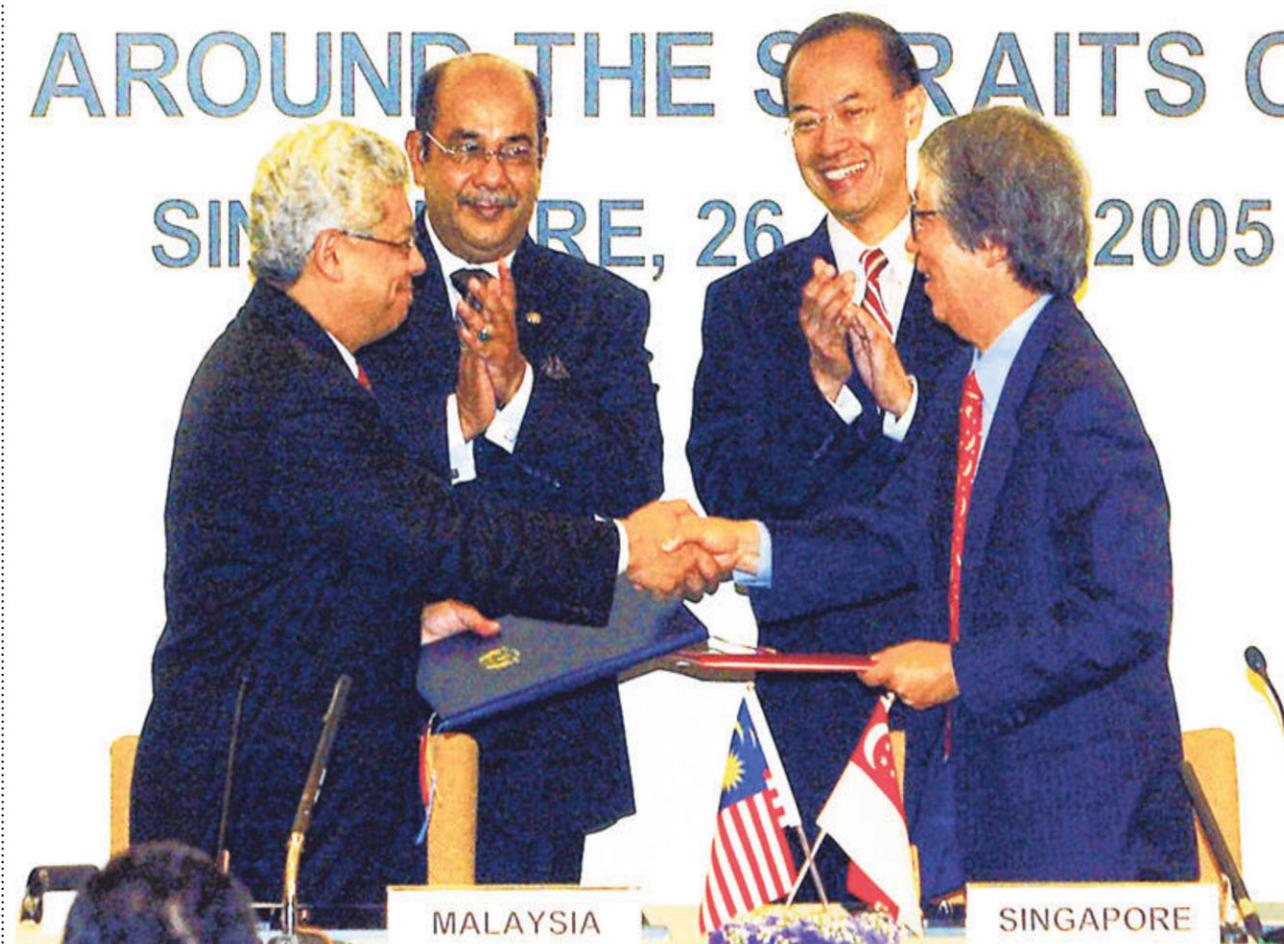
It comprised the Solicitor-General of Singapore Victor Winslow; two High Court judges from Malaya, Mohamed Suffian and Eusoffe Abdoolcader; the dean of the Monash University law school, Sir David Derham; and Professor L.C.B (Jim) Gower of London University.

Appearing before this panel for my oral examination was both a happy and terrifying experience.

I will always be grateful to them for awarding me with first class honours. After graduating, I returned to the law school and joined its faculty. I kept in touch with both Judge Suffian and Judge Abdoolcader.

I followed, with pride, the career of Judge Suffian as he was appointed as the Chief Justice, and then as the Lord President of the Federal Court.

During my tenure as dean of the NUS law school from 1971 to 1974, I nominated only one person for the



Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak (left), then Secretary-General at Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shaking hands with Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh after the signing of the settlement agreement on the land reclamation activities around the Strait of Johor in 2005, as then Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar and his then Singapore counterpart George Yeo looked on. ST FILE PHOTO

honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. He was Tun Suffian.

I served as the Public Orator at the university commencement in 1972, when Tun Suffian received his doctoral degree.

Why do I admire him? He was intellectually brilliant but very humble, and a man of integrity.

He was a good judge and had devoted his life to serving the cause of justice.

I remember he was outraged by the sacking of his successor, Tun Salleh Abas, by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Five senior judges, including Judge Abdoolcader, were suspended during the 1988 judicial crisis.

I was very honoured when the University of Malaya invited me to deliver the inaugural Tun Suffian Public Lecture in 1989.

Tun Suffian passed away in September 2000 at the age of 82.

2 DIPLOMATIC WARRIOR ZAINAL ABIDIN SULONG

Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong was a career diplomat. He rose through the ranks and retired as the Secretary-General of Wisma Putra, which is equivalent to the permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He was posted to the United Nations as Malaysia's Permanent Representative from 1980 to 1984, which overlapped with the period when I was Singapore's UN Permanent Representative from 1974 to 1984.

The four years when we were at

the UN were critical to Asean.

On Dec 25, 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime and imposed a new government backed by Vietnam. The five Asean countries decided that they had to oppose Vietnam's action because it posed a danger to Thailand and we could not condone the behaviour of a country which had sent its armed forces across an international boundary into the territory of another state.

The fight between Asean and Vietnam at the UN was a baptism of fire for the South-east Asian regional grouping. The odds seemed stacked against us as Vietnam had the support of the Soviet Union, its allies and India.

The five Asean permanent representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand met frequently to strategise our battle plans and next moves. In the end, and much to the surprise of the world, Asean prevailed over Vietnam at the UN.

I will always remember Tan Sri Zainal, who died in 2010 at age 77, as one of the five Asean diplomatic warriors. He was courageous, fearless, eloquent, calm under fire and a dependable ally.

3 CAREER DIPLOMAT 'BERTIE' TALALLA

Datuk Albert Talalla, 88, known as Bertie to his friends, was a career diplomat, having served as Malaysia's ambassador to China,

Germany and the United States.

Bertie was in Washington from 1986 to 1991, while I was there from 1984 to 1990. We were colleagues and good friends.

There were six Asean ambassadors – from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – in Washington at that time.

We constituted the Asean Washington Committee.

We liked each other and worked well together. We believed in strength in numbers.

For example, if we wanted to see a senior US official or a US Congress member, we were more likely to succeed if the request came from the six of us.

We also divided the work among us. Each embassy would specialise in one topic. For example, Singapore focused on trade policy, Malaysia on palm oil. We also went on roadshows to different parts of America to tell the Asean story, its relevance to the US, and to highlight our concerns.

In one city, Bertie told me he was tired of talking about palm oil. He asked me to speak on palm oil at our next stop, and he would cover trade. I agreed and became quite knowledgeable about palm oil.

This is an example of the camaraderie among us.

4 TAN SRI AHMAD FUZI: A PERFECT GENTLEMAN

Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, 72, the current Yang di-Pertua

Negeri of Penang, has also been a career diplomat.

He was deputy chief of the Malaysian embassy in Washington between 1987 and 1989, where our paths crossed for the first time.

I was Singapore's ambassador from 1984 to 1990. We became friends. He was a star even then and rose through the ranks to eventually become the Secretary-General of Wisma Putra from 2001 to 2006.

Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi and I were on opposite sides of a legal dispute between Malaysia and Singapore, over the Republic's land reclamation activities in Pulau Tekong and in Tuas.

On July 4, 2003, Malaysia dropped a bombshell on Singapore. It sent Singapore a diplomatic note, referring the dispute to arbitration, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Singapore responded by pointing out that the law required both sides to attempt to resolve their differences through negotiations first before resorting to arbitration.

On Aug 13 and 14, 2003, a Malaysian delegation, led by Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi, met our delegation which I headed in Singapore. The talks went well and Malaysia promised to host a second round in Putrajaya.

However, no second round was held. Instead, Malaysia applied to the Hamburg-based International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (Itlos) for provisional measures to

stop Singapore's reclamation activities until the outcome of the arbitration. The matter was considered by Itlos in September 2003.

The Malaysia agent in the case was Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi, and I acted for Singapore. The oral hearings were held over three days.

On Oct 8, 2003, Itlos rendered its judgment, which did not grant the provisional measures which Malaysia had asked for.

Instead, the tribunal instructed the two countries to establish a group of independent experts to conduct a joint study into Malaysia's allegations. This was my proposal to the tribunal in my concluding statement.

On Nov 5, 2004, the group of experts submitted its unanimous report to the two governments, which later agreed to accept it and to resume negotiations. After two intensive rounds of talks held in Singapore and the Hague, in the Netherlands, the two delegations agreed on a settlement.

The land reclamation case was a very complex one, involving several stages. The fact that we were able to resolve all our differences amicably was due, in part, to Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi's leadership.

He was fair-minded and a perfect gentleman. It was a pleasure to have worked with him, even though we were on opposite sides.

Our paths crossed again two years later. In 2007, we were appointed by our respective governments to the High-Level Task Force to draft the Asean Charter. I chaired the group in the second half of 2007.

We were racing against time to present the charter to the Asean Summit in November of that year. There were many difficult issues to resolve, such as human rights and the mobility of labour.

Because of our friendship and the goodwill between us, Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi helped me to achieve consensus on several occasions.

BUILD ON COMMON INTERESTS AND FRIENDSHIPS

I conclude with three messages for young Singaporeans and Malaysians. First, do not demonise each other. Instead, try to get to know each other better.

You have much in common, be it the way you speak, the music you listen to, the books you read, the movies and sitcoms you watch, the comedians and actors you follow on either side of the Causeway or, most importantly, the food we all enjoy.

Second, our two countries have many more areas of common interest than differences. We are each other's second-largest trading partners and major investors.

Covid-19 highlighted these areas of common interest and interdependencies, like the cross-border flow of goods and services.

Third, there are good people on both sides and friendships between Singaporeans and Malaysians are in the interests of both countries.

The bonds of friendships established over time will allow for frank and friendly discussions of our differences to take place with confidence, and contribute to their amicable resolution. My own friendships with my diplomatic counterparts from Malaysia and elsewhere are testament to this.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Professor Tommy Koh is Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.