

The royals just want their say

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The timing of the statement, delivered by the Tengku Mahkota at the opening of the state legislature, is interesting.

It comes at a time when there has been a lot of positive feedback in the Malaysian media following Prime Minister Najib Razak's efforts to improve ties with neighbours, with the perception that Mr Najib has won recognition, at least regionally, for his own achievements as PM.

Mr Najib wants to improve his image and secure foreign investment for Malaysia. The bridge is an example of economic tie-ups between Malaysia and Singapore which are hoped to be mutually beneficial.

The immediate reaction is that the statement from the Johor royal family has again complicated bilateral relations indirectly. Because the bridge goes through Johor, they have some say in it and are entitled to it.

But I think the statement may signal some degree of dissatisfaction on the royal family's part, who perhaps feel they have not been duly consulted because a lot of these investments — particularly Iskandar — are on Johor territory and would have implications for not only the state, but also the royal family.

My second observation: If you look at the state of Malaysian politics today, you would see how the royal families have been trying to reassert some degree of power. The royal family in Perak getting involved in the recent change of state government would be an example.

So, I see this statement from the Johor royal family as domestic politicking, but with implications for ties with Singapore. It will require Mr Najib to act fast to contain the potential damage this might do to the deal.

What is important for Malaysia now is to reinforce the image that it is open and friendly to investment and economic development.

Will there be an attempt to contain this matter and even to involve the Johor royal family in the development of the bridge? Or will the Malaysian government bypass them and declare this a federal government project? We don't know.

Is this a major setback for Mr Najib? No. This is just the royal family asserting its authority and power, in an internal debate over an economic issue.

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