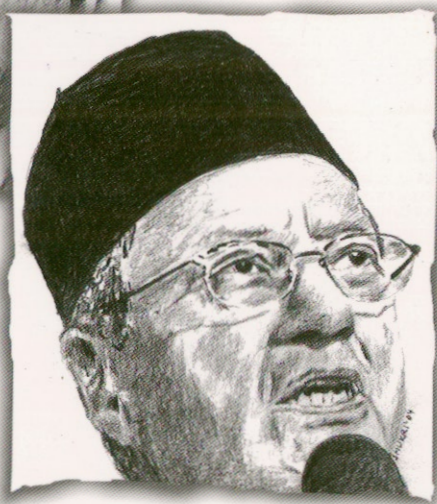


S E R I E S O F L A N G U A G E S T U D I E S

THE RHETORIC OF
DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Man

Mahathir bin Mohamad was born on 20 December 1925 in Alor Setar, Kedah - a northern state in Malaysia. He is the youngest of nine siblings. He went to a Malay-medium school for two years then went on to an English Medium school. In 1947, he went to University of Malaya in Singapore to obtain a Medical degree in 1953. Even while still a student in secondary school, Mahathir had anti-colonialist sentiments and had been in the center of the people's struggle against British colonialism from the beginning. He had been an active opposer of the Malayan Union.

While his fellow students at the English school were isolating themselves from the people's struggle, Mahathir was already fraternising with fellow students and teachers from religious schools, teachers from Malay schools, religious scholars and movement leaders in Kedah, the kind of people regarded as dangerous by the British (Zainuddin, 1994: 12).

As a university student, he was very active and often participated in debates. Apart from that, he was editor of the medical students' magazine and the President of the Muslim Students' Association in his medical college. Between the late 1940s and early 1950s, he was an active

contributor to the daily *Straits Times* and *Sunday Times* and went under the pseudonym *C.H.E. Det*. Khoo Boo Teik (1995) in his book *Paradoxes of Mahathirism* had categorized the articles written by *C.H.E. Det* based on their contents. According to Khoo, the writings fall into three categories:

1. Observations of Malay customs and social life;
2. Analyses of the problems of the Malays;
3. Political writings (Khoo, 1995: 82).

After he graduated in 1953, Dr. Mahathir had several stints in a few hospitals. His first job was as a houseman in the General Hospital in Pulau Pinang. Then he worked as a medical officer in the General Hospital in Alor Setar, Kedah. He had a short stint as a relief doctor in Perlis and after that he was posted in the General Hospital in Langkawi (Adshead, 1989: 40-41). He left the government in 1957 to open his own clinic called "Klinik Maha". Apart from his medical practice, he had business interests and formed partnerships with Malay traders and associates. Among his ventures were transport, quarrying and housing projects (Zainuddin, 1994: 5).

Politics had been in his blood since the early years and he had been a member of several people's movements since 1945. Among them were SABERKAS, the Kedah Malay Association, the Kedah Malay Youth association, and UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). He rose from being an ordinary member to committee member in Kedah UMNO in 1955. Then in the 1964 General Elections, he won the parliamentary seat of Kota Setar South, Kedah. He held on to this seat and went on to become a member in the Supreme Council in 1966 (Zainuddin, 1994: 31).

Dr. Mahathir aired his views and criticisms openly which many times were in opposition to those of the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. These differences in opinion eventually culminated in 1969 when he was expelled from UMNO. He was first sacked from the

Supreme Council on 12 July 1969 and later in the year from the party. The reason was given in a press statement released by UMNO's Secretary General which read that there was a "wide distribution to the public of Dr. Mahathir's letter to Tunku Abdul Rahman, President of UMNO Malaysia" (Zainuddin, 1994: 28). Very shortly after the riots of May 13, 1969, Mahathir had written a letter addressed to Tunku to indicate his dissatisfaction with the way matters were handled by the administration and this letter was widely circulated among the people.

During the three years that Dr. Mahathir was in political oblivion, he wrote a controversial book which was banned by the government. Among other things, the book entitled *The Malay Dilemma* extrapolates "the causes for the 13 May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur, ... why the Malays are economically backward," and suggestions on a "rehabilitation of the Malays" (Mahathir, 1970).

The book left an indelible mark on Malaysian society in general and the Malay people in particular. Dr. Mahathir's ideas on "constructive protection" for the Malays and the economic proposals revealed in the book seemed parallel with the strategies laid out in the NEP even though he was in political exile during the structuring of the NEP in 1970 (Khuo, 1995).

The most controversial part of the book was his hypothesis on the inferiority of the Malays and his criticisms of the apathetic attitude of the Malays in accepting their fates and lack of fortune. For many years after he became Prime Minister, he strived to change the mental and behavioral attitudes of the Malays based on the assumptions he made in the book. In 1996, when asked in an interview with *Time* magazine if he thought that the people had changed, he replied by saying:

They responded well, once I got them to understand what was holding them back. Principally there was a lack of confidence, a wrong focus. The Malays were thinking far too much about their inability to compete with the Chi-