

Paradoxes of Mahathirism

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An Intellectual Biography of
Mahathir Mohamad

KHOO BOO TEIK

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*To the memory of my friends,
Lim Boon Teik and Pramod Manaloor*

Preface

FIN DE SIÈCLE, or the end of the century, has been notorious for inducing hope and dread, sometimes of millenarian proportions, among people in the world. But the coming end of the twentieth century may well find many Malaysians exhilarating in an atypical complacency.

So much of the developing world wallows in misery, underdevelopment, and turmoil, but Malaysia is prosperous, growing, and stable. So many among the developed nations appear to lack resolve, direction, and aspiration, but Malaysia is moved by determination, vision, and ambition. Whereas the New Economic Policy period of 1970–90 was characterized by trepidation, anxiety, and altercation, the National Development Policy era beginning with 1991 is seemingly blessed with assurance, certainty, and tolerance. If, in the mid-1980s, Malaysia was considered to be highly vulnerable to economic retrogression, it is, by the 1990s, widely assumed to be Asia's fifth newly industrialized tiger. If Malaysians then were held to be captive to inter-ethnic acrimony, now they seem to be scarcely troubled by ethnic matters. In short, if once the nation seemed unable to do anything right, now it seems unlikely to do anything wrong. For all its slogan's vulgarity, the 'can do' chant of 'Malaysia Boleh', regularly broadcast over Radio and Television Malaysia, captures the spirit of the times in which Malaysians now live.

However one views or assesses the impact a political leader can have on a society, many Malaysians will unhesitatingly credit Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad with these recent changes in Malaysia's fortunes. They will thereby be attributing, perhaps unknowingly, their own change of heart—from the relative pessimism of the 1980s to the overflowing optimism of the 1990s—to the immense influence of Mahathirism, the ruling ideas of the Mahathir era in Malaysian political history.