

The man who speaks his mind

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IN THIS month's Malaysian Business, Deputy Prime Minister **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** talks extensively about his political life, the choices facing the bumiputra community today, Malaysia's ambitious industrialisation plans and other controversial issues of Malaysian politics.

Dr Mahathir admits to being forthright — which does not endear him to everybody. Either as a government backbencher or as Deputy Prime Minister, he speaks his mind.

He explains: "Hiding things, being nice does not take one very far. There is a defect in being nice because one is very likely to be taken for granted. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not going to be nice."

Is not his forthrightness a handicap in politics, leading to his being considered an "ultra" or "extremist" and complicating relations with political and other leaders at home and abroad?

But Dr Mahathir is not so easily put on the defensive. Very coolly, he takes to the offensive. Outside the glare of publicity, one gets the reasons — politely but firmly — for the hardhitting views that often capture the headlines.

First, he insists that he is not an ultra or extremist — "labels politicians like to attach to whatever their opponents say" — while admitting to being frank and forthright.

Going quite naturally back in time, without any specific prompting, Dr Mahathir returns to a cause close to his heart which has also led, he obviously feels, to his being branded "ultra" or "extremist" — bumiputra opportunity.

"All I was asking for was fair treatment for the Malays... In those days the number of bumiputra students in the universities was minute, there was hardly any in business... (on the other hand) I do not believe that bumiputras should take over everything for themselves."

But to correct wrongs, Dr Mahathir feels that the country must give more than an opportunity to the bumiputras. "We have to bend over backwards so that in the rebound you get the median line. You have to be extreme a little, but not completely until you break."

Nonetheless, Dr Mahathir acknowledges that his views and style of political sniping did strain relations, with the Tunku and Mr Lee Kuan Yew particularly. As an Alliance backbench MP for Kota Setar Selatan in the 1964 Parliament, he was active and voluble. He spoke out against what he saw as the Alliance's "gentility and caution and reluctance to take drastic action."

Polarisation

During Singapore's two turbulent years within Malaysia, Dr Mahathir attacked what

he said were Mr Lee Kuan Yew's ambitions for himself and for Singapore in the newly-formed federation.

Dr Mahathir: "Lee Kuan Yew would not regard me as an ultra now — although I still subscribe to the same policies. He must recognise we are doing what is fair to ourselves and to Singapore. There is no way we can accept a dominant position for Singapore in Malaysia which he was driving for at that time."

With the Tunku — "who belonged to a very conservative generation" — Dr Mahathir admits to serious differences of opinion, but "there was nothing personal."

According to Dr Mahathir, the events of May 1969 "confirmed all my predictions which I had conveyed to Tun Razak particularly... that we were moving towards racial polarisation and that concessions being made by the Government (to the other races) were too great for the Malays to accept."

Without, of course, condoning the rioting that occurred, Dr Mahathir holds that what happened in 1969 proved him right.

However, even if it can be argued that a forthright political style serves a domestic purpose, would it not be counter-productive in external relations? Does not the telling off some foreign countries get from Dr Mahathir affect his and the country's relations with their leaders?

Dr Mahathir does not believe that it has. Foreign political leaders are a little upset but, on the whole, they are willing to sit and listen — "because some of our views are basically accurate."

True to his combative political nature, Dr Mahathir continues: "We were accused at one time of being lazy. The Encyclopaedia Britannica described a Malay as indolent. If they can say that, and say that openly, I see no reason why we cannot say what we believe about them — especially if it is factually correct."

Dr Mahathir is particularly upset by some vestiges of colonial thinking among the British — as in their mental inability to accept that Malaysia has a right and the resources to take over a British company.

In addition, the Deputy Prime Minister is adamantly opposed to our having to pay very high prices for British goods so as to support "laziness" and wage increases, and to provide "feather bedding."

"For what? To support a welfare state? Whose welfare? Not ours."

Typically, Dr Mahathir fights back, makes his point, emphatically. He has always called for real, rather than theoretical, manifestation of opportunity for the bumiputras. Similarly, in as real a way, he defends what he perceives as the national interest vigorously. His public political persona may seem

abrasive. But, he is really a much nicer man than even he himself admits. When he says he will not be nice, he means, if he is going to be taken advantage of. But, beyond doubt, he is a hard taskmaster.

Criticisms

Even with the bumiputras, and also now perhaps particularly with the bumiputras, Dr Mahathir is not sparing with his forthright criticisms.

The bumiputra must seize the opportunity given him and work hard. He must take his chances, otherwise he will miss out.

According to Dr Mahathir, bumiputras face a choice between moving forward or stagnating with their old-value systems. The Malay dilemma today is no longer what he spoke of in his famous banna book. It is now up to the bumiputras.

He attacks those bumiputras who are envious of the success of other bumiputras, who look around for faults in others.

But do not general incentives result in growing disparities within the bumiputra community as only some can take advantage of them? Should not the Government try to ensure that there is a spreading out of the benefits?

In perhaps the clearest exposition so far of the Government's policy, Dr

Ma'athir says the NEP is about equal opportunity, not about equality. Within it, a free, competitive ethnic thrives.

He points out that those who are doing well now also include those from the class who were have-nots — they have all been given equal opportunity. "The NEP does not promise to make millionaires of every bumiputra. It only promises to upgrade the standards of all bumiputras. Some of them will, of course, be upgraded more, others less."

Dr Mahathir takes educational opportunity as an example: "You can't give scholarships to everybody so that they can study to become lawyers, engineers and doctors. Is the NEP, therefore, unfair because only the cleverer ones benefit? On that premise, you cannot give anything at all to anybody."

Strong words

In business, Dr Mahathir continues, a licence to operate does not ensure equal success: capabilities are unequal.

Nonetheless, isn't the NEP also about the eradication of poverty? Would not an imbalance in achievement between the modern industrial sector and the traditional, rural one give rise to political problems?

Dr Mahathir returns to his theme that the Government has made available the opportunities. Against complaints that infrastructure facilities in the rural areas do not actually put money into people's pockets (which is what they find more immediately satisfying), Dr Mahathir replies that how much money is made depends on how the facilities that the Government has provided are used.

If a farmer does not use the road that the Government has built to go to town to sell his produce for a higher return, but waits for someone from town to come to him to buy it at a lower price, he has only himself to blame.

If, after the Government has provided irrigation facilities, the landowner sells his land because of the higher value instead of cultivating the land to get a better, recurring income, he cannot blame the Government after he has used up the money from the sale — a once-and-for-all affair.

He hits at bumiputras who blame the Government, and hits them hard. He warns them: take the opportunities, otherwise they only have themselves to blame.

Strong words again. But Dr Mahathir is also a man of action.

He has proven himself

an extremely able administrator since his first ministerial appointment as Minister of Education in September 1974 — after returning

from the political wilderness (following his expulsion from Umno in September 1969) in March 1972.

Dr Mahathir is today a dynamic Minister of Trade and Industry. He is visibly excited when talking about Malaysia's industrialisation plans.

The industrial sector will, in 10 years, constitute between 30 and 40 per cent of the GDP.

The country is moving into all kinds of industries. But, step by step, with the most viable first. He emphasises the importance of markets: "That is why we first went into import-substitution industries — we have control over our own markets."

Then, since we produce so many raw materials, "we have decided to process some of them." Next, because of our energy-endowment, "we have decided to move into basic industries — like steel and aluminium."

Eventually we will be industrialised across the whole spectrum — "from the production of compo-

nents right into the fabrication of big machinery."

Dr Mahathir believes that by the year 2000, we could be producing consumer items and capital goods of our own designs.

The new industries coming up will be big ones — involving capital outlays of \$500 million, \$1,000 million, no longer the \$10 million to \$20 million industries of yesterday.

Stability

"This is how Korea and Taiwan made rapid progress. Once you break the initial barrier, progress will be very rapid.

"Now is the time to do it. We have the energy, the raw materials, manpower and other assets like political, economic and financial stability."

Dr Mahathir is now relatively more sanguine about market access, a point he has highlighted at many international conferences.

"Protection there will always be. Japan, Taiwan and Korea moved into areas where there is no protection.

"The problem with Malaysians is that they are scared of foreign markets — having always done business through third parties in Singapore or, at the very best, through trading companies belonging to foreigners which have been in this country for a very long time."

One of Dr Mahathir's present preoccupations is to develop a Malaysian marketing arm, probably modelled on the Japanese "sogo-shoshas." He stresses the importance of sufficient market information in business.

"If you know, you win. You must always be alert. Information-gathering requires a lot of investment."

Indeed, Dr Mahathir reveals, the Government will allow foreign trading companies to do off-shore trading, provided they have Malaysian participation — a departure from the old policy of not allowing foreign trading companies to do other than trade between their country and Malaysia.