

THE THOUGHTS OF DR MAHATHIR

● DR TAN:

It is widely regarded that your elevation and the rise of Datuk Musa are a historic watershed in the political growth of Malaysia in that you represent a self-confident new elite that is entirely Malaysian in education and experience and owe nothing to any colonial godfather. How does it coincide with your own perception of your rise to Prime Minister?

● DR MAHATHIR:

It is, in a way, correct, but I must say that I was involved in Umno from the beginning. As far as Umno politics is concerned, this is mainly a confirmation of my own participation

and the principles that the Umno stood for. There was no radical change in the direction in Umno so as to allow us to say that this is a watershed which implies the changing of course.

● DR TAN:

By watershed, I mean that the previous Prime Ministers that we have had, like Tunku Abdul Rahman, the late Tun Razak and now Datuk Hussein Onn, all had their education in England. The Tunku was from St Catherine's College, Cambridge, Tun Razak and Hussein Onn were both at the Inns in London, and they are of an older generation.

You have qualified in

Singapore, you are a home-grown product and you don't owe your education, your upbringing as a student to any colonial godfather and that must affect the thinking of anybody who has such an education. That is what I mean by 'watershed'.

● DR MAHATHIR:

If that is the definition, then it is quite true but at the same time I am still very much associated with the old British leadership.

However, having been locally educated and perhaps been more closely associated with the grassroots, I perceived things from a slightly different angle from pre-

vious leaders but that is not to say that it will be such as to have a radical change in our nation.

As far as I am concerned, and I can speak also on behalf of Musa (Datuk Musa Hitam), we are not so much at variance in terms of policy — it is only in terms of implementation that perhaps there may be a change of style. As you know even as a Deputy Prime Minister, I have been more concerned with the running of the Government which means having direct contact with the implementers.

Although now I am going to be Prime Minister, I'll continue to have this kind of ap-

proach towards implementation and I am quite sure Datuk Musa, too, is very much concerned about the carrying out of the policy and not so much of our confirmation of policy. I think the policy as far as we are concerned is all right.

It is suitable but sometimes we find that policy and implementation gets way ahead. That is the part which will make the Government, the new Government, different from the previous one. Otherwise it will be the same.

● DR TAN:

Dr Mahathir, you and your deputy have a head

start over your predecessors in that your Malay constituency is assured. You only have to win over the confidence and trust of the non-bumiputra portion of our population. Can you spell out broadly how Malaysians of all races and religions can have a place under the Malaysian sun?

● DR MAHATHIR:

I would say in the first place that I have been misinterpreted and misunderstood even at the time when I was labelled an ultra. I felt that the labelling was a political gimmick, and that image is unacceptable to a large majority of Malaysians. When I was a Member of Parliament, all I was talking about was that the Malays should have a fair share in this country — no more than that.

I am not saying that the Malays should be given a status so superior that they will suppress others and I don't think anybody will disagree on the issue that Malays and Chinese and Indians should have each their fair share in this country.

If the achievement of the fair share causes certain unpopular measures, it cannot be helped. Measures are apparently biased. This is interpreted by many people as being unfair to the non-Malays but I don't think it's unfair because if you look around you, I think the non-Malays have done even much better since the New Economic Policy was implemented.

● DR MAHATHIR:

In every aspect of life there should be a distribution, whether in a private firm or in the government sector. Whilst we have found in some very big firms bumiputras holding positions of importance, there are others who cannot do that in the private sector: we have to make place for them in the government sector.

That is equal treatment. In fact the Government has responded to the new situation.

We found that quite a number of non-bumiputras who work in the Government left after a time because they found the attraction of the private sector much greater.

You can see those who have gone to greener pastures were ex-government servants. They are doing extremely well and you can't retain them here. In fact, some departments have more non-bumiputras. Maybe people do not meet them. For example, if you go to Mida, the chances are that you will meet a Chinese or an Indian rather than a bumiputra.

One reason perhaps is that the private sector can pay two or three times more than the government sector, that is why they have taken the non-bumiputras.

● DR TAN:

Although you were associated with the amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act which destroyed the autonomy of our universities,

politics will diminish to a certain extent. I do not know how long it will take. I do not know whether by 1990 we would be ready for this but a lot depends really on the

success of the New Economic Policy.

You may have heard that in the last Umno General Assembly there was one Malay who donated \$9 million to the party. He has obviously gained very much by the implementation of the New Economic Policy.

Secondly, he has gained because this country is stable and economically doing well, that is why he is able to make this money. As the number of such people increase, there'll be a vested interest in this country as it remains stable and viable.

When we have this vested interest, then the question will diminish and they will have common grounds with the Chinese who also have the need for a stable nation in order to maintain their position and wealth and their opportunities to make wealth. Once you come to that, there may be a class division rather than a racial division.

● DR TAN:

Again and again, we look not for words and promises but deeds. I refer to what Datuk Musa had said last November in Sungei Penchala. Speaking about admission to our universities, he said that admissions of bumiputras will be decreased by two per cent

this year, the Government would lose its credibility.

● DR TAN:

You have been tested by a period in the political wilderness, in opposition so to speak. It is a remarkable testimony to the resilience of Umno that it could accommodate you and allow your emergence to power.

For a while it seemed that you might well end up in political prison to come out only through

the well-beaten path of confession and admission of error. Has this experience determined your attitude to freedom of expression in Malaysia, now that you are in a position to deny it to others?

And do you regard dissent as an inescapable part of, and is the sine qua non, of democracy which you say, both the Umno and the Barisan Nasional Government believe in and practise?

● DR MAHATHIR:

I believe that there would be dissent in any community. However, dissent should be something that is constructive, that is directed towards correcting certain abnormalities within the society. But dissent for the sake of dissent is something which I don't care for.

I was thrown out of Umno because of that very specific reason, and I held to that reason because I thought that was constructive criticism I had made. Umno eventually felt that I wasn't trying to destroy them or

criticise the Government because we may be doing something that maybe is wrong and you have an idea how it can be corrected, I am willing to listen.

● DR TAN:

Now if I may take you up on that. More and more, the Government has clamped down on dissent. The latest example, of course, is the Societies (Amendment) Act 1981. You have said that any society which seek to influence the Government must change its rule and become a political society.

Let us take the Malaysian Medical Association for example which you and I belong to. The MMA is a non-political society and has no interest whatsoever in political matters, but it seeks to influence the Government towards certain issues in this country as in any other country.

It has appeared before the Ministry of Finance to ask for certain concessions for the medical profession. Does that automatically cause it to be labelled a political society?

In other cases, societies connected with trade have protested for certain rights. They protested because they want the Government to do something otherwise their living would be affected. For instance, the Government does not seem to do much to reduce the price of sugar now that the world price of sugar has come down. If the Government is not doing anything, then they will be accused of exploi-

In fact if you look at KL, the growth of KL took place after 1969. Before 1969 there was hardly any growth. Economic growth came after 1969 when the New Economic Policy was initiated in 1970. The pace did not change, in fact it is accelerated so there is no reason to worry about these things.

The reason why we want more growth is that we are committed to distributing growth, not distributing the original economic package. There will be no distribution if we don't encourage growth and certainly all communities will want to see growth so that they will have a share. But, of course, there must be sufficient to give to the bumiputras.

● DR TAN:

As for the non-bumiputra, and as a non-bumiputra, if I may interpret, some of the qualms and misgivings are reflected in the share market that has fallen in the last few days. They say that now we have two ultras at the very top posts. What is going to happen next?

Bluntly speaking, when you have a new department, will you have the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians working together instead of just the bumiputras? Foreigners coming to this country have the impression that this country belongs to the Malays only which gives a poor image of this country.

nevertheless you have emerged with a following among intellectuals and professionals who admire you personally as a progressive moderniser. Do you think we are ready as 1990 approaches to produce leaders with a multi-racial following based on ideas and policy?

● DR MAHATHIR:

I think there is an increased number of people who are motivated by ideas and policies rather than race, but the fact of race must be taken into consideration in all our calculations. The thing is that the most educated elite have their own lives.

They have begun to realise that there is a need to apply themselves to the process of improving their capabilities in terms of knowledge and skill in order to bring about their own success and the success of the nation. I think if despite of the Universities and University Colleges Act, they are still with me, it is because they realise that I didn't do this merely to punish people. It is merely because there were a number of irresponsible people who diverted the attention of students from their studies to the much more irresponsible act of getting others to do things. That is why most of the intellectuals still feel that the Government is, still with them.

As we go along I think the concept of racial

animosity to reach 55 per cent, and the non-bumiputra student population will be increased by two per cent to reach 45 per cent.

That is a tremendous thing to say by any Minister. Naturally the bumiputras are not happy. He has made a very good promise but if this year the figures do not reflect the change you might as well forget about getting credibility with the non-bumiputra.

● DR MAHATHIR:

What Musa had said is the total figure but in order to reach the total figure, one has to be admitted to different faculties, not only into the universities. Certain faculties have to have a greater preponderance of bumiputras in order to balance.

The non-bumiputras do not want to do arts courses, they want to do science, medicine, etc. These are the courses where we are trying to build up for bumiputras. As you know, out of 3,000 doctors, we have 250 bumiputras. How are we going to increase that number unless there is some bias for bumiputras in that area. But you are talking of the intake of bumiputras, that it is excessive, taken as a whole. We would like to reduce this and increase the others. What Musa had said is his honest intention.

● DR TAN:

I have no doubt what Musa had said was sincere. If what has been said is not implemented

the Government.

If you want to have dissent, by all means have dissent but not by creating something such as saying things that might frighten away foreign investors for no reason merely, because you want to say it.

I think that is a rather negative attitude and that I don't think I can tolerate. You know students still criticise me and the Government. If you were to ask them, they'll tell you that I have sat down to listen to their criticisms. But if they want to have demonstrations and publicity, then I am not prepared to have that kind of thing. I have protested before in forums — but I didn't urge (them) to have a demonstration.

When there was a demonstration in 1967, I think, in which you, Dr Tan, tried to stop — I don't know whether you remember that — I told Tun Dr Ismail at that time that if this is the demonstration they want, I'm prepared to bring 20,000 people from Kedah for a demonstration in Kuala Lumpur just to show how strong the people support the Government.

But Tun Ismail advised me not to do such a thing. He said "let others do it but I must not do it as I am in a government party." I obeyed what he requested of me.

If it is a question of showing dissent mainly because that is the fashion, then I am not for it. But if you want to

ting the people.

● DR MAHATHIR:

I think your interpretation is wrong, because the law says that when the action of a society taken as a whole is political in character or words to the effect, then we can declare that as a political society.

The mere complaint that the price of sugar has gone up does not constitute a political activity. Taken as a whole, it is just one isolated instance of a criticism over the price. How could the Consumer Association of Penang function if they cannot criticise?

In fact I've assured the Chinese Chambers of Commerce that merely criticising or suggesting to the Government on certain specific issues will not make it a political society. It must be really something taken as a whole. Whereas if we have a society which goes around campaigning, use rallies and all sorts of things and generally agitating the people, then this will be classified as political society.

● DR TAN:

Today I have made myself very unpopular with some people after what I have written in my column about Harun. I've received a lot of abusive letters. Well, it doesn't worry me. What I am concerned about is the right to dissent. It must be a sine qua non of democracy.

As far as the Government is concerned, a feedback from the public is very necessary. The Government, in stifling

the societies from giving their views, is in a way cutting off a very important source of feedback. There are other governments who have spent money to hold opinion surveys to get feedbacks. If our government allows societies to speak out loud and bold on various issues concerning them which they should bring to the attention of the Government — then you are getting a feedback for free from the public.

This I think is very vital. What is your opinion?

● DR MAHATHIR:

Well, we would be glad to hear the opinion for free. But as you know if somebody plugs a line which causes a lot of agitation among the people for no very good reason, then of course that is a different matter entirely.

You must know that there was one professional association that has dissented to the level of holding a demonstration at Parliament House when that association knows very well that there is a law which states that no Parliamentarian should be obstructed — that is one

of those things.

● DR TAN:

The lawyers are the people you can least be afraid of. They are one of the most respectable and conservative people in this country. I think there should be more of such instances where they can identify themselves with the people.

● DR MAHATHIR:

I like to differ there. If a professional association of that standing descends to the level of holding demonstrations precisely against the law which they are very conversant with that, is an example which is not

good for the whole nation, because others will follow. People will ask: if those of that standing could do it, why can't we?

If we have demonstrations, I can assure you that I can arrange more demonstrations than anybody else. What kind of a country would we be in if it is a question of how strong you can demonstrate against the Government, and they demonstrating how strong they are with the Government, then we can never end this kind of confrontation.

We would like to take things through the in-

stitutions which have already been set up — that is what Parliament is for. And in this country, as you know, despite all the things they said about us, people from the opposition can still win elections if the people really want to vote them in.

You can see that in every Parliament that we have, there is an opposition member. There may not be many of them but they can come in. I would say that democracy is dead if in every election in Malaysia we see a government party winning 100 per cent.