

A BOOK FOR EVERY THINKING MALAYSIAN

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IT WOULD seem rather odd. **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** told UPI correspondent Paul Wedel just before he was sworn in as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, if *The Malay Dilemma*, the controversial book he authored in 1970 should continue to be banned in the country.

Thus when the lifting of the ban did come on July 30, 1981, the decision was not really unexpected — perpetuation of the ban would imply that his thoughts are too "sensitive" for the reading public.

But the book, the latest edition of which hit the streets last week is recommended for every thinking Malaysian, though all may not agree fully with the thoughts expressed.

As the publishers of the first edition, Times Books International of Singapore, pointed out in

the forward, they believe the author's views should be read — whether or not they share them.

They felt the author is fully entitled to give his interpretation of the Malay's viewpoint, though not all Malays may agree to his explanations or his opinions.

In fact, the author never intended to please all readers.

"Indeed it is most likely to cause despondency among some, and severe resentment among most others. No apologies are offered. What I have written is written with sincerity," said **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir** from **Kota Setar** in **Kedah** where he lost his parliamentary seat in the general elections of 1969.

More than that, he was writing 'this during his sojourn, into the political wilderness after having been expelled from Umno's Central Committee and later

from Umno itself for his clash with the then Prime Minister **Tunku Abdul Rahman** after the outbreak of the May 13 tragedy.

Elected to Parliament as representative for **Kota Setar Selatan** in 1964, Dr Mahathir had soon acquired a reputation for being a highly vocal Alliance, backbencher.

While, 'the *Malay Dilemma* seeks mainly to explain the causes of the May 13 incident, the 188-page diagnosis by the medical practitioner-turned politician did not hide his fierce disagreement with the ruling elite under the Tunku.

Dr Mahathir in fact chose to open the book by questioning what could have gone wrong with this multi-ethnic country.

Making it clear that it is, not his "vindictiveness but an exercise in social responsibilities" that had led him to pul, pen, to

paper, he pointed out with the benefit of hindsight that "racial harmony in Malaysia was neither real nor deep-rooted."

He took the Umno leadership to task for having deviated from its stated policies, of making parliamentary sittings a pleasant formality, of altering the constitution "at will", and for rewarding Cabinet posts to party chiefs who were "mediocre yes-men."

"It is clear by the time the 1969 elections approached, all sections of the people were disenchanted with the Government," said the author who attributed the Malays' dissatisfaction to the Government's habit of continually favouring the Chinese without correcting the real imbalance in the wealth and progress of the races."

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The Chinese in turn, he said, were antagonised when the Malays aired their grievances to the Government.

"What went wrong? Obviously a lot went wrong. In the first place the Government started off on the wrong premise. It believed that there had been racial harmony in the past and that the Sino-Malay co-operation to achieve independence was an example of racial harmony."

"The gulf between the people widened so much that the Government was no longer able to feel the pulse of the people or interpret it correctly. It was therefore unable to appreciate the radical change in the thinking of the people from the time of independence and as the 1969 elections approached.

"And finally when it won by a reduced majority, the Government went

into a state of shock which marred its judgment. And so murder and arson and anarchy exploded on May 13, 1969.

"That was what went wrong," Dr Mahathir said, closing the chapter with his usual forceful note.

In another chapter, Dr Mahathir made "an intelligent guess" as to the influence of heredity and environment on the Malay race.

His views have however been met with fierce objections on the part of social scientists, notably Dr Syed Hussein Al-Attas, Professor of Malay Studies in the University of Singapore.

A firm believer in Mendel's Law of Heredity, Dr Mahathir believed that "heredity factors play an important part in the development of a race."

While he was vague in citing the specific traits of the Malays which are genetically determined, it was obvious that he believed genes exert considerable influence.

He asks: "How much of the parents' characteristics are inherited? How much of the less tangible characteristics such as intelligence, diligence, resourcefulness, etc, are inherited?"

In contrast, the 1964 Unesco Statement on Race states: "According to present knowledge, there is no proof that groups of mankind differ in their innate mental characteristics, whether in respect of intelligence or temperament. The scientific evidence indicates that the range of mental capacities in all ethnic groups is about the same."

While it may be scientific to say that marriages between close relatives and those involving people who are mentally retarded have a higher chance of producing deficient offsprings, his statement that first cousin marriages are still frequent among Malays and result in the propagation of poorer characteristics is not adequately supported.

He was definitely more confident when he talked about the effects of the environment on the Malay race.

By arguing that the Chinese race has a "history . . . littered with disasters . . . and a custom' decreeing that marriage should not be within the same clan," the author saw a "hardy race" in the Chinese.

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By contrast, in Malaya where "food could be found and grown in plenty on these plains, and fish and meat must have been easy to come by . . . the Malays became primarily plainmen, cultivators and fishermen."

"The Malays whose own hereditary and environmental influence had been so debilitating, could do nothing but retreat before the onslaught of the Chinese immigrants," the author concluded.

Less people, "including political scientist Dr Chandra Muzaffar of Universiti Sains Malaysia, would argue against the effect of geographical environment on human characters.

*More, however, would object to the author's interpretation of the socio-economic

history of the country, and the character of the Malay race.

The critics' pointed out that the lives of the Malay farmers and fishermen were not as easy as the author had painted them to be.

Neither can the Malay personality traits be generalised as fatalistic, indisciplined, non-punctual, incapable of hard work, and easy-going.

Dr Mahathir strongly believed that the British were partly to blame for the backwardness of the Malay race.

"The British did not merely divide the Malays from the Chinese, but went on to divide the rural Malays from the town Malays (which affected the character of the Malays considerably, and rendered them more and more impotent politically and economically," he said.

The author had however some good words to say about the colonial master: "Before Independence the British ruled the country well. They may not have given the non-British inhabitants the 'best of everything, but certainly they were expert administrators."

In like manner, he also believed that "the feudalistic inclination of the Malay is not damaging," because "it makes for an orderly law-abiding society."

On the whole, the author gave a very strong, and valid defence for the urgent need to correct the imbalances that exist between the Malays and the Chinese by a formula which he called "constructive protection."

Putting the Malay in the same category with the Red Indians of

America, the author argued that "in order to protect and preserve their status, certain laws are necessary."

"Unless the Chinese in particular are willing to hold back and appreciate the need to bringing the Malays up in the economic field, not even the determination of the Malays and the schemes of the Government can help to solve the Malay economic dilemma."

He also believed that at the initial stage, it is necessary that "a select few" among the Malays should become rich.

"With the existence of the few rich Malays at least the poor Malays can say that their fate is not entirely to serve the rich non-Malays. From the point of view of racial: ego, and this' ego is still strong, the unseemingly existence of Malay tycoons is essential," he rationalised.

For non-economic formula for interracial harmony, the author recommended that "language and, an intimately related culture remain essential factors in the establishment of national unity."

He believed that the Malays, "the definitive original people of Malaya," should insist upon the non-Malays to speak nothing but Malay, "the definitive language of the country."

Incidentally, *Revulusi Mental* a book produced by the Umno Youth movement the same year *The Malay Dilemma* was published, holds quite similar ideas particularly those touching the character of the Malays.

Dr Mahathir himself was told that his book was used as the basis for drafting the New

Economic Policy introduced after the May 13 tragedy.

Thus, one can conclude that it was not so much out of "academic" than "political" objection that the book was banned.

The author said that he still holds on to the opinion expressed in the book and that since then "people have come around to my views rather than I have come around to their views."

Perhaps, the lifting of ban on *The Malay Dilemma*, expected to hit local sales record, will help the Prime Minister to put his personal conviction to his people in a more positive manner that will prove workable for the total good of the country.