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# 'We Will Not Form a Military Alliance'

## INTERVIEW: MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

**Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 58,** has long been one of Malaysia's most outspoken politicians. After being expelled from the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in 1969 over policy differences, he published "The Malay Dilemma," a controversial analysis of Malaysia's racial and ethnic problems. He was readmitted to UMNO in 1972 and became prime minister in 1981. After a recent visit to Washington, Mahathir met with NEWSWEEK'S Larry Rohter in Kuala Lumpur to discuss economic and foreign-policy issues. Excerpts:

**ROHTER:** How would you characterize the current state of Malaysian-U.S. relations?

**MAHATHIR:** Friendly, I would say. Our views of many areas of international affairs differ, but I think our bilateral relations are reasonably good.

**Q.** Historically, Malaysia has been oriented toward both the Commonwealth and the Islamic world in its foreign policy. Do you want to establish closer links with Washington?

**A.** The United States is the single biggest economic unit, and so whatever happens to the U.S. economy has a direct bearing on Malaysia. Therefore, we must have some tangible relationship with America.

**Q.** Do you think the United States has shown sufficient interest in developing such ties with Malaysia?

**A.** We accept the fact that the United States has to deal with 150-odd different countries around the world, and maybe that makes priorities for Malaysia very difficult for it to determine. But nevertheless we feel it is wrong to consider a country with very few problems, like Malaysia, as something of little significance and wait until there is trouble before you take a good look.

**Q.** One of the keystones of your foreign policy is membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Will ASEAN evolve into a full-fledged economic or security alliance?

**A.** I don't think so. A lot of people assumed that when ASEAN was formed it would become an economic community, but it is not easy to be involved in a Common Market type of setup because the nations involved are so different. For example, Indonesia has 150 million people and heavy tariff rates, while Singapore has 2 million or 3 million people and no tariffs. It's very difficult to equalize this sort of situation. As for the security role, we are not going to

form a military alliance, although bilateral arrangements can be made. We do not want to attract hostility from other people.

**Q.** But you already face potential threats, with Russian bases in Vietnam and Vietnamese troops in Cambodia. Why not take collective measures to deal with this challenge?

**A.** If America finds it difficult to handle the Soviets, I doubt whether the alliance of the six ASEAN countries can do very much. There are other ways of handling the situation than forming a military alliance.

**Q.** What is the motivation behind your "Look East" economic policy, which urges Malaysians to study and borrow from Japan's success?

**A.** When we said "Look East," we were not looking to the East for supplies or to give them contracts. We are thinking about the work ethic and systems of management, plus the loyalty, discipline and dedication. These are the values we think can help us develop Malaysia.

**Q.** Your administration has emphasized a program of Islamization. Is that another way to instill such values?

**A.** Well, yes, if you interpret Islam correctly. There is a lot of confusion in the Westem mind about what Islam is all about. For most Western people, Islam is represented by an intolerant attitude toward everybody-hanging people, chopping off their hands and all of that. But Islam is

much more than that. Islam means tolerance. It means discipline and loyalty. These are the values that are propagated by Islam. When we talk about absorbing Islamic values, we are talking about these things.

**Q.** In your book "The Malay Dilemma" you painted a very bleak picture of relations among the races. Are you still as pessimistic as you were when you wrote the book in 1978?

**A.** I wouldn't say I am totally pessimistic. I think we can resolve the problem. We do have this racial mixture, and yet Malaysia has been relatively stable and harmonious. That is a fact nobody can deny. I know that everyone keeps on predicting that we are about to burst. It did happen in 1969. But what that did was to remind us to be more careful, and since then the economy has boomed and we have had no problem.

**Q.** Malaysia has recently gone through a constitutional crisis. Why did you find it necessary to curb the powers of the king?

**A.** Strictly speaking, it was not curbing the powers of the king, because the king never had any powers. However, the wording of the Constitution was such that it could be misinterpreted. On one or two occasions it was misinterpreted and papers were not signed. That embarrasses the government. Therefore, before that happens again we need to clarify the fact that the king has no political power. That is what a constitutional monarchy is all about.

**Q.** Will the government's relations with the royal house become strained as a result of this crisis?

**A.** If it happened at all, it would be very, very temporary. Malaysia has a great deal of resilience. After 1969 people had written off Malaysia, and you know what the results are today. Outsiders have read more things into this constitutional crisis than have those who are really involved in them. Of course there will perhaps be some strains, but I don't see any problem here.

**Q.** Malaysia has essentially been ruled by the same party since it attained independence. How is the country different under your rule than under your three predecessors?

**A.** It is a question of emphasis and style. The policy is still basically the same, but I must admit to being rather impatient, and I want to see things done. If things aren't done, I descend like a ton of bricks on the people who don't do the job they are supposed to do. Perhaps people see me as rather crude and brash, but we are not all made the same.