

DR MAHATHIR

'Bold and fascinating'

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PRIME Minister Mahathir Mohamad "has proved himself to be not only a skilful politician but also the country's boldest and most fascinating personality". This is the conclusion offered in a profile published in *New York Times* yesterday.

Written by the newspaper's South-East Asia correspondent who evidently failed to get an interview with him, the profile sees Dr Mahathir "becoming an increasingly outspoken champion of fast-growing South-East Asia". With Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew moving toward retirement, and President Suharto and Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda staying close to home, Dr Mahathir may have to carry the torch for the region, the article surmises.

"His message to the West has been that there is a new Third World that no longer fits the old stereotypes and that it is time the First World came to terms with it. It is a world, he has said, of experimentation with new systems of society and government that accepts neither the East nor the West wholly as models."

Describing Malaysia as a quiet country with few problems, the article says that the Prime Minister "travels round the country promoting both Islamic values and

advanced technology, Eastern culture and Western capitalism".

Dr Mahathir is described as "a relatively conservative Muslim and an ethnic Malay nationalist". The fact of his expulsion from Umno in 1969 is duly recalled, and also that his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, remained banned for over 11 years until he became prime minister.

"Ironically for this vigorous supporter of the Malay cause and with it the Islamic religion, Dr Mahathir has been under constant pressure from Parti Islam. The Prime Minister believing that true Islam preaches tolerance and keeping up with the times calls his Muslim critics 'reckless and emotional extremists'. He has forbidden them in the name of national unity to call fellow Muslims infidels."

The profile claims that tensions between Malays and Chinese persist. "Animosities are refuelled by government policies that give preference to Malays who are on the whole poorer than Chinese."

The Prime Minister, the article says, is unmoved by the criticism that the enthusiasm and confidence of the Chinese, traditionally the entrepreneurial class, is being diminished at a time when Malaysia needs to expand industry and

attract investment.

Unable presumably to obtain an answer to the criticism from the Prime Minister himself, the profile quotes him as telling a BBC programme: "We know the Chinese are very hard working, very diligent and very successful in business. If we allow that to go on, we will find the Chinese and other races have different economic status. In a country where we have different races, the fact of race alone is divisive enough."

Recalling that the next general election is due by 1987, the profile quotes unnamed diplomats and political scholars as saying that the choice Dr Mahathir makes regarding the date "will be the biggest test of his political sagacity". Why this will be so is left unexplained. In a reference to the Prime Minister's personality, the profile says that he has acquired the reputation for "abrasive, sometimes insulting but never dull speeches".

The profile, the friendliest by American standards, notes that the Prime Minister is bitterly critical of the American Press because it is dominated by big business and controlled by editors who determine the slant — as he evidently told an audience at the Oxford University last month.