

MALAYSIA

"I Know How the People Feel"

An interview with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

TIME, NOV. 24, 1987

With his *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) garnering 57% of the popular vote, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad won a solid victory in elections last August, taking 148 of 177 seats in Parliament. Yet national harmony continues to be an elusive goal: the economy remains in recession; tensions between Malays and non-Malays are, by Mahathir's admission, more visible than in many years; and the Prime Minister's insistence on doing things his way has hardly contributed to healing wounds. In an interview last week with TIME International Editor Karsten Prager and Bangkok Bureau Chief James Willwerth at Kuala Lumpur's Parliament House, Mahathir discussed the economy, politics, a controversial proposal to tighten Malaysia's Official Secrets Act, and other major concerns. Excerpts:

On the economy. We see things bottoming out. We think that to recover we have to be competitive, we have to reduce our costs of production. If commodities are not going to return to the old days of high prices and low costs, we have to switch to manufacturing or to adding more value to our commodities. Basically, we are sound. The policy we followed was very good: average annual growth was [up to] 8%. But once commodity prices went down, the domestic economy slowed down. We now accept that commodity prices will never regain their [previous] levels. But we can make up for that by reducing our cost of production and by processing part of the raw materials. We are spending as little as possible, except where it affects the economy. We are thinking of a growth rate of 4% to 5% in three or four years.

On the New Economic Plan, which attempts to increase Malay participation in the economy. The N.E.P. is very much misunderstood. Its aim is to eradicate poverty and restructure society. This does not mean just introducing equity [for Malays], but increasing jobs and redistributing them so that you no longer have an identification of economic function with race. We want to see as many Malay executives as there are Chinese executives and Indian executives, proportionately. We are not going to be rigid. Quite definitely, however, we will have to take the N.E.P. beyond 1990 [the original target date of the plan] because restructuring and redistribution must take place. Otherwise, there will be political instability. If you have a case where the rich come from one race and the poor from another, you have a very explosive situation. We are going to try to eliminate the identification of race with wealth. That means conflict will be between rich and poor, not between rich Chinese and poor Malays. There are definitely poor

Chinese, but compared to the number of poor Malays they are fewer. If we let things go, a whole lot of people, probably the entire indigenous population [Malays], will feel antagonistic toward people [of Chinese and Indian descent] whom they will identify with a foreign country. We cannot tolerate this.

On the political situation. [Before the election], there were all kinds of predictions, based mostly on wishful thinking, from

people who would have liked me to lose. But I know how the majority of the people feel. And I knew I could go to an election at a very difficult time, when everything was depressed. We won, and now we have settled down to work. But [opponents] would like to see things go wrong, especially those who feel that they rather than I should be running the country. I believe there should be an opposition. I would hate to see the day when there is none. Of course, I would like to see them be more constructive, not just play on emotions.

On creating a multiracial party. I think the time is not there yet. A lot of people still want to identify themselves with their [ethnic] origins. It will be good for Malaysia when people begin to say, I am a Malaysian.

On racial polarization. Well, there is more talk [lately] about race, but we have always settled our problems. This [racial tension]

is just a flash; we are bound to have this kind of thing off and on. I wish there were greater harmony, but things are not as bad as the opposition would like to think.

On the Official Secrets Act. Our O.S.A. is a copy of the British one, and according to the British, government documents are secret. We find of late that lots of government documents have been stolen and handed over to businessmen and journalists. Under the law, the punishment is so minor that people are quite prepared to pay someone comparatively large sums of money to steal these documents. Newspapers consider that they have a right to all information. But we cannot carry on when the inner thinking of government is exposed. If you steal, and you publish, you will have to be punished. Who makes the law? Legislators elected by the people. Either you believe in the majority or you don't believe in the majority. That is why we have decided that this country cannot afford the [same] kind of interpretation of so-called democratic rights as other countries. Of course, people may say, "We don't like the way you draft your laws. We don't like the punishment you are meting out." If they don't like it, throw us out.

On his differences with the press. The press is powerful. It can change the minds of the people. What is happening is that the press is muzzling us. If I say anything, even in this country, my speech gets twisted, reinterpreted, analyzed. In the end, it is not what I say that counts but what the press says that counts. It is not me anymore. I will not get a fair hearing in my own country. If we are tough, we lose out. If we are soft, we also lose out.

On his charges that "Zionism" influences the foreign press. There is a pattern. We expect the *Wall Street Journal* to be fair, but nothing good has been said. We find that every time there is a World Bank or Asian Development Bank meeting, out comes more [criticism]. Maybe it is because we are friendly with the Libyans [and] the P.L.O. We are very pro-Arab. I've known Jews who have written good articles. But some of these Jews are quite incapable of being fair to others.

On the courts. The judiciary says [to us], "Although you passed a law with a certain thing in mind, we think that your mind is wrong, and we want to give our interpretation." If we disagree, the courts will say, "We will interpret your disagreement." If we go along, we are going to lose our power of legislation. We know exactly what we want to do, but once we do it, it is interpreted in a different way, and we have no means to reinterpret it our way. If we find out that a court always throws us out on its own interpretation, if it interprets contrary to why we made the law, then we will have to find a way of producing a law that will have to be interpreted according to our wish. ■