

Staying on the inside

Mahathir opts to influence Commonwealth from within

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad announced on 17 October that Kuala Lumpur would host the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 1989, it startled those familiar with his previous views and those who knew that Malaysia had even contemplated the possibility of quitting the organisation. The fact that Malaysia was making a bid to host the next summit itself was a well-kept secret.

Mahathir did not volunteer any details for the shift in attitude, save to say that after attending the CHOGM in Vancouver he was "convinced that we should stay." He also praised Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal for his persuasive powers. Ramphal has on a few previous occasions argued that Malaysia would be far better able to influence the Commonwealth from within than without.

The shift of position should not be exaggerated as indicating a change in Malaysia's foreign relations priorities,

cautioned an insider. The decision to remain a member is in fact an extension of Malaysia's non-aligned policy.

Born of a network of Britain and its former colonies, the Commonwealth members are — with the exception of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain itself — almost by definition, developing nation states, seven of them in Asia. For Malaysia, the Commonwealth builds automatic bridges to the Caribbean, Africa and the South Pacific.

Having negotiated a peaceful independence from Britain in 1957, Malaysia was for 25 years an unwavering supporter of the Commonwealth, a reflection perhaps of its close links with Britain in the early years. But Britain's entry into the EC in 1973 meant it was distancing itself from the Commonwealth.

After Mahathir assumed office in 1981, Malaysia's foreign policy shifted away from such traditional associations with the developed West to greater interaction with Asian neighbours and fel-

low developing countries. The past few years has seen increasing emphasis on Asean, the Organisation of Islamic Countries, on South-South dialogue and Malaysia's identification with smaller Pacific states' interests.

The larger Commonwealth forums are often dominated by "international stalwarts" addressing world issues which are not particularly relevant to Malaysia, observed an officer familiar with its workings. Mahathir skipped the summit in Melbourne in 1981 and New Delhi in 1983 — describing them at the time as "just talk and very little progress" — but attended the 1985 meeting in the Bahamas. However, he did attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meetings in Fiji in 1982 and Papua New Guinea in 1984 in line with his emphasis on relations with South Pacific nations. The regional grouping felt there was no necessity to meet in 1986 but Malaysia is due to host the next one in 1988.

Mahathir himself has not been shy in his criticisms of what he once termed "a social club of English-speaking ex-colonies." There must be a "radical change in the attitude" of some members if the Commonwealth was to survive, he said. "There is nothing common about the wealth of the Commonwealth," Mahathir again said in Sep-

tember 1986, opening the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Kuala Lumpur. "Often there is not even a great wealth of understanding between us. Thus the rich among us frequently refuse even to understand the problems faced by the poor — even when the problem is of their making."

The moment of reckoning came in July 1986, when Malaysia joined others in boycotting the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh in protest at Britain's refusal to impose economic sanctions against South Africa — the first non-African country to join the boycott. By October, the cabinet had directed the Foreign Ministry and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis), a quasi-government think-tank, to study the pros and cons of remaining in the Commonwealth. The Isis findings, basically a subsidiary report to the one done by the ministry, backed up the latter's arguments for staying in.

The studies had looked at five options, ranging from a formal withdrawal from the Commonwealth to taking a more dominant role in the 48-member organisation. In between, it could also opt to be a sleeping member — sending junior officers to keep a watching brief at meetings — it could maintain the status quo, or it could, without shifting away from the status quo, more actively

seek opportunities for advancing Malaysian interests, say on technical cooperation and trade.

The studies recommended the last option and concurred that the benefits of remaining a member far outweighed the costs. As its 1.5% share to the secretariat, Malaysia contributes £94,466 (US\$56,700) a year in fixed membership fees and a fixed sum of £3,870 to the Science Council; it also contributes

£15,000 to the Commonwealth Youth Programme, and this year is doubling its contribution to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation to £100,00.

In return, Malaysia shares the benefits of Commonwealth study programmes on youth, women, terrorism, environmental concerns and mutual assistance in judicial matters, among others.

Like the other developing countries, Malaysia could not seek a dominant role because that would demand too great a financial commitment. Also, as a small country, Malaysia simply lacks the political clout. But if it had quit the Commonwealth, Malaysia would have had no leverage to express its unhappiness with the policies of any country with which it found itself in disagreement. Mahathir feels particularly strongly about sanctions against South Africa and at the recent meeting also tried to persuade the others to retain Fiji's membership while it solved its internal problems.

Tacitly, several of the smaller countries would like to exert more influence in Commonwealth agenda-setting, a feeling reinforced by Britain's adamant lone stand on apartheid. Britain's views seem increasingly out of step with other members, reinforcing the growing feeling that Britain is not the Commonwealth.