

Diagnose again, doctor

Malaysia's Mahathir is feeding a fever

DESPERATE circumstances demand, at least by cliché, decisive action. Hence the clutch of arrests ordered by Malaysia's prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, since October 27th. Those detained—more than 90 at midweek—in-



clude almost half of the main opposition party in parliament, as well as politicians from Dr Mahathir's own coalition. Most of those arrested are Chinese, but some are Malays and Indians. Some of the detainees are men of culture and intellect

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who follow no party. They are held under the Internal Security Act, which is renewed as a formality every two years but permits indefinite imprisonment without trial. Lest any of this be debated too freely, three newspapers—publishing in English, Chinese and Malay—have been summarily banned. Are circumstances really that desperate?

Malaysia is a country that is not yet a nation, because its racial composition is particularly complicated and its brief history has been scarred by that fact. The Malays, with a privileged political position under the constitution, make up just under half the population of 16m; the economically powerful Chinese a third; the often-downtrodden Indians roughly a tenth. The race riots of May 1969, when hundreds of people were killed and wounded after the Chinese frightened the Malays by doing too well in an election, are engraved on the collective memory. Dr Mahathir justifies the present crack-down by recalling those horrors. He believes that most Malaysians, whatever their race, will prefer the selective nastiness of a Draconian law to the general pain of racial violence.

If that sounds too bland, it is. The doctor himself is one cause of the illness he is now trying to treat. In his six years as prime minister he has pursued the politics of confrontation in a culture that believes in consensus. The New Economic Policy, drawn up after the 1969 riots to deal with the Malays' startling disadvantage in wealth, has been practised in ways

that were bound to infuriate the Chinese. Islam has been promoted by methods that disturb the undevout of all races. And politics within the United Malays National Organisation, the main party in the coalition, has degenerated into factional battles in which Malay chauvinism is brandished as an obvious weapon.

Explain it was just acupuncture

Now Dr Mahathir is prescribing a palliative that may prolong the illness. The range of the arrests pretends at an even-handed application of the law. In reality an act devised by the British to lock up communist insurgents is now being used to silence not only alleged racial demagogues, which may have a point, but environmentalists and members of the Aliran social reform organisation. When criticism is so sweepingly suppressed, it will breed unseen—and destructively.

Dr Mahathir used to appreciate that argument. When he came to power about 500 people were detained under the security act. Before this new outburst, he had reduced the number to fewer than 30. Unless he can produce better reasons than he has shown so far, the doctor had better order some speedy releases (and claim credit for having administered a "short, sharp shock"). Otherwise, he will be moving Malaysia, after 30 years of more or less prosperous democracy, towards an authoritarianism from which no race will benefit.