

A convincing picture of Dr Mahathir

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IT TAKES courage to write about a man as complex as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Because, no matter what a biographer includes or omits from the profile of a well-known personality, his writings will be open to criticism. At the very least, he can be accused of putting together an incomplete portrait of his subject.

If the portrait is that of Dr Mahathir whom Malaysians look upon as a familiar if somewhat formidable figure in their lives, the biography will be subjected to intense scrutiny.

Even the smallest error will be noted because most Malaysians rightly feel they know their Prime Minister and his life history.

In all probability, British photojournalist Robin Adshead was aware of this when he published his biography of the Prime Minister titled *Mahathir and Malaysia: Statesman and Leader* this year. The book is now being distributed locally by Berita Publishing.

To defuse possible criticism, Adshead acknowledges his admiration of the Prime Minister even before the story begins.

In his foreword, he writes: "If this portrait of the Prime Minister seems to the reader to be stressed in his favour, it is because I believe him to be a man of shining integrity, underecimated by many of his countrymen and the Western world alike, a man of vision and faith who, at this stage of Malaysia's development, believes more strongly in the

capabilities of the Malaysian people than perhaps they currently do themselves."

Having stated this, Adshead then pulls together past, present, political and personal evidence to support his high estimation of the Prime Minister. Using simple language, attractive pictures and quotes from interviews with Dr Mahathir and others, Adshead puts together a convincing picture of the Prime Minister.

Adshead not only makes an admirable attempt to bring Malaysians closer to their leader but he tries to set the record straight by giving Dr Mahathir the opportunity to reflect on all things past and recent and to reveal important background factors to some of the controversial decisions he has made as Prime Minister.

The author does a reasonably good job of making readers understand Dr Mahathir the public personality and Dr Mahathir, the private man. Adshead shows that there are no contradictions between the two.

In the second of seven chapters titled *The Beginning* readers are introduced to the young Mahathir. His early years were happy and calm. Youngest in a family of nine, he was loved by all especially his mother. This is reassuring because love or, more important, the absence of love can affect a young individual in ways that cannot be measured.

Readers are told that the Japanese Occupation had an indelible impact on Dr Mahathir: it was during these painful years that he had to fend for himself and see his brothers and cousins being

thrown out of their Government jobs and into the streets selling fruits.

It was also during this period, writes Adshead, that Dr Mahathir first realised how impotent the Malays were compared with the non-Malays in business and other economic matters. The exposure to all this forced the young Mahathir to radically change his views on many things.

By the time he completed his secondary educa-

tion, he was already involved in politics. Even the medical degree was a conduit to greater political involvement in the affairs of his people.

His family, of course, accepted his absence as gracefully as they could. Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah knew her husband well; his desire to make fundamental changes to the lives and attitudes of rural Malays was insatiable.

Even during the period when he was asked to

leave Umno, he was able to produce *The Malay Dilemma*, a book which many Malaysians have read even when it was banned by the Government.

Perhaps the most absorbing and indeed poignant part of the biography is the period in which Dr Mahathir spent as a Government doctor and later, as a private physician in Alor Star.

When Dr Mahathir had his own practice, his clinic

would begin at 9am and close until he had seen the last patient — often at 9pm. But as Adshead writes: "When the clinic was first opened, he brought his lunch to the office; he was embarrassed by the thought of leaving while there were patients waiting for his attention. He would snatch a brief snack in the examination room, and start work again."

Such details, small no doubt, reveal the compassionate side to the man. His awkwardness at having to leave the clinic when patients were waiting shows his keen sensitivity towards other human beings.

Other humane qualities about the man are also revealed in the book. He has, for instance, the rare capacity to listen a trait refined during his days as a practicing doctor.

He is also shy and reserved but unfortunately, this is often mistaken for arrogance and aloofness.

He can be blunt and forthright but his foes regard this as part of his authoritarian or dictatorial style.

Of all the criticisms that have been heaped upon him, the one which accuses him of being a dictator has hurt Dr Mahathir most deeply, Adshead writes.

To Dr Mahathir, a leader who has no firm stand is not a leader. "Accordingly," he tells Adshead, "a leader must try to get his views accepted as much as possible. If he succeeds in persuading his co-workers, it does not make him a dictator. It merely makes him a successful leader. There is a difference between strong leadership and dictatorship. However it is not

easy to point this out to people, especially the detractors and the envious."

Rut, despite everything, the Prime Minister has the capacity to remain calm, to absorb problems and mull over them quietly.

"He accepts that failure and success are part of life and does not get too excited or depressed over either aspect. If he fails, he says, he simply waits for a better opportunity and tries again," writes Adshead.

Malaysian readers will be less drawn to sections of the book which delve into the political history of the country. Yet, all this is important because it shows how the environment in which Dr Mahathir grew up influenced him and how he, in turn, has changed it.

Naturally, not all Malaysians have appreciated what the Prime Minister has done for the country. Some feel he has pushed too hard for changes that people are not ready for; some cruelly accuse him of having a "tunnel vision" a vision which only allows for his views and no other.

For a first attempt at producing a biography, Adshead certainly found a most fascinating personality in Dr Mahathir. The book, to be fair to the Prime Minister, gives a good but limited view of the man. Nonetheless, it does try to explain some of the decisions and policies made by Dr Mahathir.

If nothing else, *Mahathir and Malaysia: Statesman and Leader* should wet our appetites for a more scholarly and detailed account of the man responsible for some of the most dramatic changes in our lives.

I WAS greatly touched by the picture on the front page of *The Star* yesterday which showed Queen Elizabeth II in intimate conversation with our first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Royal Commonwealth Society's Commonwealth House in Kuala Lumpur. Obviously, they must have been talking about old times.

The Tunku said the meeting was specially arranged because the queen had expressed her wish to meet him. He was so touched by the queen's gesture that he kissed her hand.

Our nation joined the Commonwealth as its tenth member, after we achieved our independence in 1957. The other pioneer members of this free association of independent nations were Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), India, Pakistan, Ghana and Britain.

The Tunku participated in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London in 1959. He said, after meeting the queen: "I'm the only one who is still alive. The rest of the 1959 group are all gone."

The Tunku played a leading role at the tenth post-war conference of Commonwealth prime

Dr Mahathir did the nation proud

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Dr. Mahathir

minister held in London in 1961 which denounced South Africa's policy of apartheid or racial segregation. By then, Cyprus had also become independent and joined the Commonwealth as its eleventh member.

As a result, South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth upon becoming a republic on May 31, 1961.

When making this announcement, the then South African Prime Minister Hendrik F. Verwoerd said: "It is clear that the view of the majority of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, after the lead given by a group of Afro-Asian nations. South Africa will no longer be welcomed in the Commonwealth after May 31 when she becomes a republic in the circumstances. I wish formally to withdraw a request for South Africa to remain a member of the Common-

wealth after she becomes a republic."

The South African leader said the events "which have obliged me to take this regrettable step, in my opinion, marked the beginning of the disintegration of the Commonwealth this free association of states cannot hope to survive if, instead of devoting itself to co-operation on matters of common concern, the Commonwealth prime ministers are going to continue the practice of interfering in each other's domestic affairs, and if the meetings are to be made the occasion for attacks on fellow-members."

Mr Verwoerd's prediction about disintegration of the Commonwealth has been proved wrong.

Not only has this association of free states survived, it has grown to a big family of 49 nations, embracing one quarter of

the human race in all the five continents of the world, representing such diversity of races, languages and religions.

Following the military coup in Fiji, the island nation in the Pacific ceased to be a member of the Commonwealth. The place it vacated has now been filled by Pakistan.

It is almost certain that Namibia, which will soon become independent, will also join the Commonwealth as the 50th member. This South West African territory was a German colony. After World War I, it was administered by the Union of South Africa under the League of Nations mandate. South Africa continued to administer Namibia as a UN trusteeship after World War II.

Our Malaysian soldiers are now serving under the UN flag in Namibia, where a general election will be held under UN auspices next month. SAPO, the African freedom movement, is expected to be admitted to the UN as another sovereign independent state.

Another African nation, the Republic of Cameroon, has also sought membership of the Commonwealth. This was the former German colony of Kamerun which was divided into two parts after World War I. The southwestern part was administered by Britain under the League of Nations mandate together with Ni-

geria. The north-eastern part was mandated to the French. Under UN trusteeship, after World War II, the French part, which bore the name of Cameroun, became the independent Republic of Cameroun on Jan 1, 1960, as a result of the resolution of the UN general assembly in 1959, in which I personally played a very active role.

When Malaya became a member of the UN in 1957, it was the 52nd member of the world organisation. There are of course more than double that number of members now.

I am also very happy that Pakistan is back again in the Commonwealth, after an absence of 17 years.

I like to compare Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's action — remembering that it was her father who decided to take Pakistan out of the Commonwealth, after the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan — to what our own Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir has done.

Our Prime Minister must have shocked other members of the Commonwealth when he made a strong criticism of the Commonwealth soon after he assumed this high office. Yet he is now hosting CHOGM with such enthusiasm.

Dr Mahathir has made himself the target of severe criticism from the opposition parties, accus-



ing him of being extravagant, spending so much money in cleaning up and beautifying our capital city to make it a fitting venue for this historic conference, better than any other held here up to now.

I am very pleased to read what Chief Emaka Anyaoku, who has been elected by CHOGM as the third secretary-general of the Commonwealth! in response to a question on what he thinks of this phenomenon: "I think that Dr Mahathir has this uncommon quality of being able to combine realism with vision. It is not a very common quality because politicians tend to fall into two distinct groups — the visionaries and the practical realists who will not have too much vision to be able to combine the two qualities.

"Without vision, you will not know where you want to go and without a sense of realism you may just be drifting towards vision without substance. He has the quality of combining the two in a very attractive manner.

"When he offered Kuala Lumpur as the venue for the coming meeting (which is being held now), he made it clear in Vancouver that his government had conducted a review of the Commonwealth and made it equally clear that conclusions reached by the review were such that they encouraged him to offer Ma-

laysia as the venue

"I believe the challenge of the summit is to prove him and his government right in those conclusions and I have no doubt that it will happen."

So said this Nigerian chief who has served as his nation's foreign minister, and been with the Commonwealth secretariat since 1966, and has been deputy secretary-general since 1977.

I must admit that I have been critical of our Prime Minister on many occasions for some of his domestic policies and actions in the past. However, as I sat in the Dewan Merdeka at the PWTC, watching him deliver his chairman's speech at the opening session of CHOGM, I could not help admiring him.

His superb performance made me as proud of him as our prime minister. The personal interest that he has taken in all the preparation for this Commonwealth summit meeting has convinced me that he is genuinely committed to do the best for our nation.

Even more important, as far as public opinion is concerned, he has demonstrated his capacity to listen and positively respond to ideas and suggestions. He has the rare character and courage to change his mind and adjust his policies and plans for the general good, progress and welfare of our nation.