

Modern-day Hang Tuah?

THE OTHER SIDE
OF MAHATHIR

By Zainuddin Maidin
(Utusan Publications,
306 pages)

Review by
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HAVING lived for so long in the Mahathir Era, what do we — the average Malaysians — make of him? Is he the calculative dictator who carried out Operation Lallang and zipped shut the mouths of dissidents in one swift stroke? Or is he the visionary leader, the man who dreamt dreams that nobody dared to, brought them to reality, and as a consequence grabbed Malaysia by her hand like a father leading a child and dashed into a wonderful era of modernisation and prosperity?

Mahathir is obviously not an easy man to understand.

While promising freedom, he slammed shut the prison gates. Having objected to the adoption of the folk-song *Terang Bulan* as the national anthem (because it was too sentimental), he later retained it but gave it a faster tempo. Having had a less-than-bosom relationship with the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (who was instrumental in booting him out of Umno), Mahathir was at Tunku's bedside when he died and later built a memorial for Bapa Malaysia. While siding the poor, he drove the biggest

car (a Pontiac) in Alor Star in his early years.

Yet despite his complexities and apparently convoluted stances, he has been consistent in most, if not all, his policies. To name some, he has been consistent in his vision (2020) of turning Malaysia into an advanced, industrialised nation; in his stand against the abuses of the Malay royalty; in his faith in the free enterprise system; in disallowing religion to stand in the way of rationalism and hinder progress; in his opposition to colonialism and neo-colonialism; and in his disgust for what he calls the hypocrisy of the West.

The title of the book *The Other Side of Mahathir* suggests that there is another side to the public face of the most ambitious, intelligent and visionary leader that Malaysia has seen.

Indeed there is. Author Zainuddin Maidin (Zam), veteran journalist and former chief editor of the Utusan group, is close enough to Mahathir to know things that few people are aware of. Like Mahathir's altruism, which Zainuddin illustrates in the first chapter.

He tells of the time when his grandfather was coughing blood and his mother told him to summon the "doctor". This was to be Zainuddin's first meeting with Mahathir, who duly went to the squatter house, treated the old man and accepted whatever Zainuddin's mother could afford — RM2.

The subsequent chapters chart Mahathir's progress

from outcast to Prime Minister, his policies and achievements, his handling of problems within and without Umno, and his vision for Malaysia.

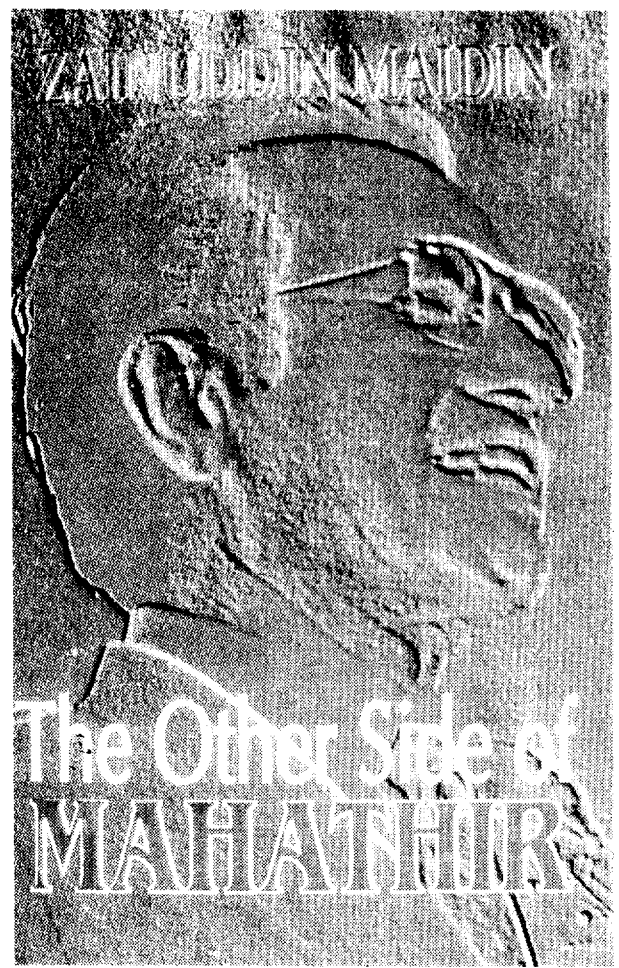
The author, being privy to inner-circle conversations and goings-on, spices his book with lots of anecdotes and quotes from interviews, conversations and letters from Mahathir. Interesting quotes from other leaders such as Datuk Musa Hitam and Datuk Harun Idris add more spice.

Events such as Musa's resignation as Deputy Prime Minister, the battle royale in 1987 between the two teams (Mahathir-Ghaffar versus Razaleigh-Musa) and the declaration of Umno as illegal make very good reading.

Now we can make an intelligent guess as to why Mahathir was beaming with supreme confidence at television cameras at the Shangri-la Hotel when reporters asked him to comment on Umno being declared illegal. According to Zainuddin, Mahathir, far from being rattled, saw it as an opportunity to push aside his main enemies in Umno and deprive them of their strength in the party.

Though the political episodes are interesting, what is of more importance in this book is the frankness with which Zainuddin writes of things that are normally not written about. Like money politics in Umno and the Malays' tendency to have faith in non-Islamic beliefs despite being Muslims.

Two passages stand out



in this respect. The first:

There is clearly a wide difference between him and his people. While he is striving very hard to sow the seeds of positive cosmopolitan values, his people are still clinging on to amulets and talismans and magical incantations to give them supernatural powers. If the Malays regard these mystical rituals as the source of their strength, to Mahathir they merely reflect the flaws in their thinking.

The other:

Even in the early stages of its prosperity, Malaysia's progress towards materialism already appeared to be going out of control. A clear manifestation of this is in politics where there is rampant use of money especially during Umno's leadership election of 1993, particularly for the posts of deputy president and vice-presidents. Money politics is not a new phenomenon in Umno, but this is the first time it was so openly practised. It was exposed at the Umno General Assembly by delegates who had themselves received 'presents' in various forms ranging from pens, radios, watches, or foreign travel, to cash payments. There were delegates who gave out their bank account numbers freely to con-

testing candidates. The call for abolition of money politics was welcomed by party members who exposed the practice as well as by party leaders who had themselves indulged in it. They spoke as if they were completely innocent of it. It was a most amusing bit of political farce played out in Umno by its leaders and downwards to ordinary members.

Mahathir, who was aware of all this, quickly moved to stop it by amending the party's constitution to "curb abuses of power, position and money for the purpose of gaining support in the party's elections".

In his indomitable style, Mahathir stamped with steam-roller efficiency his views, concepts and vision on both the political party he heads and the nation he leads.

In a letter to Zainuddin dated Nov 29, 1975, Mahathir said: "It is possible that I shall be remembered in modern Malay history as a modern-day Hang Tuah."

It could very well be so. And what of Zainuddin the journalist? He could well be remembered as the Scribe.

This book, translated from Malay by freelance journalist Wan Hulaimi, deserves to be the current best-seller.