

14/06/1997

### Shiftless and disappointing

iewed by Vejai Balasubramaniam

HAVING been in high political office for 14 years, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir makes an attractive case study for those who would rather focus on individuals and personalities rather than with issues in politics. Thus, there is now a plethora of books on Mahathir (both in English and in Malay) and it is tempting to compare one with the other to see which does the subject justice. But such comparison may be unfair and it is best that each book be approached from the standpoint of its objectives and how they have been met by the writer.

Mahathir's Paradigm Shift is essentially a reportage of Mahathir's years in political office both in the Government and Umno, the challenges he faced and their outcomes. The writer ostensibly intends to show Mahathir's remarkable "staying power" - his ability to outlast his opponents - but he gives surprisingly little explanation of how the subject actually goes about securing and consolidating his position.

The writer begins by setting out Mahathir's political philosophy. But, disappointingly, it only alludes in passing to The Malay Dilemma, the work in which Mahathir's political philosophy can arguably be most clearly found. Although much of the early philosophy has been tempered as a result of holding office as Prime Minister it is clear that his underlying goal of advancing the socio-economic position of the Malays was paramount. His early impatience in pursuing this led to his being viewed as a radical by the political elite in Umno and also his ouster from the party.

To achieve his objectives he needed to have control over economics and politics, something he acquired when he became Prime Minister. Yet although Aziz Zariza Ahmad does point to Mahathir's objectives vis-a-vis the Malays there is no mention of how he sought to go about realising them.

It is clear that the 1969 general elections which laid the seedbed for the New Economic Policy was a vindication of Mahathir in his pro-Malay demands. The Alliance saw its majority being reduced in the elections and Mahathir himself lost his own seat to PAS, which served to highlight the loss in confidence of the Malay masses in Umno. But there is nothing in the book to tell us how events following the 1969 elections helped to rehabilitate Mahathir and how he managed to rise to prominence in the party.

If these had been addressed, it would have given us a clearer picture of how Mahathir came to be appointed Education Minister by Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak after the 1974 general elections - in many ways a crucial opening for Mahathir. Instead, Aziz moves on to discuss Mahathir's economic and political policies upon achieving high office, followed by the challenges he faced as Prime Minister, chief among which was the challenge by Tengku Razaleigh for leadership of the party and the country. There is, unfortunately, no mention of the factors contributing to Mahathir's success in overcoming the challenge.

Here, the 1987 Umno election is particularly momentous. Were there factors apart from maintaining tradition (whereby leadership of the party is normally passed on to a selected successor, and the latter having to wait patiently for his turn) important in influencing the outcome of that all-important election? Did Mahathir win because many in Umno saw him as a guardian of Malay interests? How important was the concern to secure political positions in influencing electoral behaviour?

Aziz does not provide answers to such questions. In like vein, he tackles the "confrontation between the executive and the judiciary" when Umno was declared an illegal organisation by virtue of having unregistered branches. Mahathir was clearly incensed by this judgment, and while he vented his anger at Razaleigh and gang who brought the matter of illegal branches to court, a large part of his fury was directed towards the judiciary. The events which followed in the ensuing months culminated in the Lord President, Tun Salleh Abbas, losing his job.

Aziz, in his fervour to present the Mahathir years in a positive light, has ignored some glaring facts. Politically, the Prime Minister's drive to realise his vision of Malaysia has contributed to a strong centralising tendency in the country's federal system. Economically, the country's current account in the balance of payments is not particularly enviable. Socially, we find the strong materialist imperative underlying capitalist development giving rise to alienation and social ills such as drug addiction, bohsia, etc.

But it is not only in this area that the book is found wanting, for even in what it sets out to do (that is, to show Mahathir's "staying power"), the writer fails dismally.

It is very difficult to deal with a personality much less write a book on him without interviewing the subject or conducting extensive archival research. Mahathir's Paradigm Shift does neither and as such ends up shrouding its subject in mystery. This makes what could have been a potentially interesting book a major letdown.

(END)