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Looking for answers to hard questions

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WHAT is Mahathir up to? Cut out the polemics and that's probably the one question on lay minds each time the Prime Minister introduces a new policy or makes a hard-hitting statement that concerns us.

Readers won't find straightforward answers in H'ng Hung Yong's CEO Malaysia. In fact, they might even end up with more questions than answers, says the author, who attempts "to define Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's strategies, make sense of what he's been doing, and put it all down in some kind of order".

After establishing "this is how he thinks and this is how it happened", H'ng then prods Malaysians into asking: What is appropriate? Could things have been better?

"You can read the book as an exposition of Mahathir's thoughts and what he did, or you could go further and ask - is it good enough for the future?"

By querying the validity of assumptions, H'ng hopes to get readers to question whether what worked before can still work for the future. Or, is there sufficient public debate to try to define and understand what is happening.

The ability to decipher the PM's strategies would lead to a better understanding of nation-building, the fundamental pillars of which are cohesion and coherence. Cohesion involves the country's physical strengths, while coherence concerns history, culture, race, religion, and a sense of community.

On the whole, CEO Malaysia targets the challenges of building a plural society. "I don't pretend to suggest at any point that there is an ideal or optimal way of handling this issue. Moderation is paramount - we need to keep our heads, test the ground, and continue to learn and experiment," says H'ng.

"The multi-racial nature of the country underlines the fact that we have very complex problems, much more than elsewhere. We have managed to come a long way and managed not too badly.

"But this is not to suggest we have all the answers. We have committed ourselves to live in multi-racial harmony and must not lose sight of that. We can never give up."

It does not help that many economic issues are aligned with ethnic and cultural ones, H'ng says. Only by separating them can Malaysians understand the problems better and arrive at some solution.

Asked where readers should draw the line between his opinions and those of his subject's, he replies that without resorting to theory, CEO Malaysia is basically a straightforward commentary at understanding "how we've done it, how this guy thought we should do it, and now that we have done it, where do we go from here?"

More importantly, the book asks who has got it right, and what is right?

"There is never an ideal way, so where do you draw the line? If I don't ask, I don't know."

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir operates on different levels, H'ng concludes. To assess him objectively, one has to step back and see the whole picture. Although he attempts to look at the basics of nation-building at a longer stretch, his book has limitations in that it serves only as "a contemporary snapshot".

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