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A rare and refreshing view

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WAS he paid to do it?

Was Michael Backman beaten or badgered into writing a balanced report about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad?

The man must surely know the political incorrectness of doing so. Why, few outside of Malaysia would be daring enough to state, especially in these confusing times, that Dr Mahathir is not a dictator and, yes, get away with it. From the reports I've read in The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald, The New York Times, Asiaweek, Far Eastern Economic Review, to name a few, it would seem suicidal for foreign journalists (and Malaysians who work for foreign publications), to offer a balanced, let alone, positive picture of the prime minister.

But Backman did.

In the Jan 8 issue of The Australian Financial Review, Backman says the trial of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim "has seen many in Australia and the West take his side more readily at the expense of Dr Mahathir Mohamad".

(News report of Backman's article appeared in local papers on Jan 9.) Backman, who is author of Asian Eclipse: Exposing the Dark Side of Business in Asia (forthcoming from John Wiley & Sons), also notes the absurdity of making comparisons between Dr Mahathir "and some of Asia's more odious leaders".

He uses the example of ABC Television which recently ran a story claiming that other than for Suharto, 1998 had not been a bad year for Asian "dictators".

It then ran a montage of "Dr Mahathir ridiculously sandwiched between Cambodia's Hun Sen and Myanmar's Than Shwe".

Not a great moment in ABC broadcasting, he declared.

On Dr Mahathir's policies, Backman, whose motives for writing all these must surely be questioned by those who have little liking for the PM, said: "All too easily, the NEP (the key to Dr Mahathir's success) has been dismissed superficially in Australia as "racist" and, therefore, has to be rejected.

"Race-based it certainly is, but given the choice between some targeted economic curtailment and having their businesses looted and burned and their daughters raped, as has been the experience in Indonesia, it is not difficult to see which option most Malaysian Chinese prefer."

Backman also has interesting things to say about Dr Mahathir's former deputy. "The West, from Al Gore down, has uncritically latched onto Anwar in this new-found role and projected him as a force of good, against what for them is the obvious force for evil in the form of Dr Mahathir."

As Backman says: "If only things were so black and white. Dr Mahathir is as prickly as Anwar is charming - and charm can buy a lot of goodwill in the West especially if one is from the "mysterious East".

"But surely it is more prudent to judge those by what they do rather than by what they say. Anwar has accused Dr Mahathir of cronyism but it might well be a case of those who live in glass houses."

Of course, anyone making similar statements in Malaysia's mainstream media today would be lambasted for being biased so it is intriguing indeed that someone living in Australia, watching us from afar, can see and state so objectively both sides of the picture.

Backman also questions Anwar's links with Islamic movements in other

countries. "There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of this other than that 40 per cent or so of Malaysia's population is not even nominally Muslim."

Although Malaysia is no Indonesia (he made references to the Christian Ambonese hunted down by Muslims in Jakarta), "why even flirt with the risks that the mixing of politics and religion can entail?"

Nor does Backman seem to have a blinkered view of the Prime Minister.

"The efficacy of his (Dr Mahathir) Government's privatisation and mega project policies are highly questionable."

Nevertheless, Malaysia has developed into a modern, racially harmonious and generally non-sectarian country under his stewardship.

The Prime Minister might be "aggressive and lack Anwar's PR skills but Malaysians are free to vote against him in the next general election if they so choose."

"Obviously," he concludes, "being autocratic need not make one an autocrat. Similarly, being charming does not make one a democrat."

A refreshing view indeed. And, if he wasn't beaten or bullied into writing it, a rare one, as well.

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