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MAHATHIR A GREAT POLITICAL HERO, SAYS AUSSIE EXPERT

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Jan 8 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is one of Asia's greatest leaders and the creator of modern Malaysia, according to an Australian author and expert on Asian affairs, Michael Backman.

Writing in the Australian Financial Review today, Blackman says Dr Mahathir's "crowning glory is the fact that in the face of the most serious economic collapse that Malaysia has endured, the country has not been racked by riots as has Indonesia".

Blackman, the author of "Asian Eclipse: Exposing the Dark Side of Business in Asia" which will be released by publishers Jacaranda Wiley in March, says the key to Dr Mahathir's success has been the New Economic Policy (NEP).

"All too easily NEP has been dismissed in Australia as 'racist' and therefore has been rejected," he said.

"Race-based it certainly is, but given the choice between some targeted economic curtailment, and having their business 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, whose highly-acclaimed book "Overseas Chinese Business Networks in Asia" was recommended by Fortune magazine as a superior alternative to John Naisbitt's "Megatrends Asia", says Malaysia has handled its domestic race relations better than many European countries do even in good times.

Referring to former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Backman says that 16 years as being in the cut and thrust of Umno politics, "Anwar has suddenly offered himself up as the poster child for reformasi.

"The West, from (US Vice-President) Al Gore, has uncritically latched on to Anwar in this new-found role and projected him as a force for good, against what for them is the obvious force for evil in the form of Dr Mahathir. 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."

Backman says Anwar's legitimacy might be questioned on other grounds as well.

"Whereas Dr Mahathir has always sought to appeal to Malays on the basis of Malay identity, Anwar has sought to appeal to them through Islam.

"In his early days Anwar forged close links to Islamic movements in Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. And in the early 1980s, he even travelled to Iran to meet with that country's newly installed leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

"Now there may not be anything intrinsically wrong with any of this other than that 40 per cent or so of Malaysia's population is not even nominally Muslim.

"But can a leopard change its spots? Anwar's choice of the mosques of Kuala Lumpur as the venues to launch his reformasi campaign just before he was detained suggest otherwise."

Backman says Anwar's actions were akin to the Tories (the Conservative

Party) in Britain launching their campaign for the constituencies of Northern Ireland from St Paul's Cathedral in London.

"Dr Mahathir is by no means perfect. The efficacy of his government's privatisation and mega project policies are highly questionable," Backman writes.

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

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

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

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