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The daring spokesman of the developing world

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THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, 73, is perceived as the enfant terrible of the developing world's politics and has been head of government for over 17 years now. For many, it will be one of those unwelcome reminders of just how quickly time passes, and for others he has overstayed.

Whether he or the Malaysians like it the Prime Minister has been called the "political bad boy" by his opponents at home and by his Western detractors, who now includes John Howard, the Aussie premier, the author of the Howard Doctrine where he advocates Australia's new interventionist foreign policy playing the role of a "deputy US Marshall" in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) region. Though he denied it, it would have been better sooner than later; he seemed to have waited to see the reaction. Whatever, his delayed reaction, creating a running debate have soared the Aussie spirit and passion, and Howard's personal popularity. By allowing East Timor to dominate Canberra's current foreign policy he is losing sight of the long-term importance of Aussie-Indonesian relationship, a great loss, and I do feel, this Aussie impulse for intervention - belligerent or otherwise - can be perilous.

The West has pigeon-holed Dr Mahathir as the Third World's head of government who, (like President Sukarno who said "go to hell with American and Western aids,") loves (and sometimes enjoys) thumbing the nose of the Americans, and occasionally that of the British. However, one difference between the two is well-noted that maverick Dr Mahathir also courts investments from the US and Europe, Sukarno did not. The West usually overstating Dr Mahathir's disenchantment and critique against them also downplays the impressive progress and remarkable stability he has achieved for the nation.

Dr Mahathir, by all accounts remains powerful and will win his fifth general election. That's the bad news, for the Opposition coalition which had chosen Dr Mahathir's nemesis, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, (his jailed former protege and deputy as the next Prime Minister if the Opposition parties win Malaysia's 10th general election) which is expected by many to be held next year, sometime before the present parliamentary term expires in early June. The good news is that Dr Mahathir is a picture of a guarded optimist, with verve, vigour and energy; definitely he appears stronger, fitter and healthier than this writer and I am twelve years younger! That is the impression I got following meetings with him in New York last week. He has, as far as I can perceive, developed a higher consciousness, imbued a more rigorous discipline and become a revitalised workaholic even in New York, addressing five conferences, a dozen meetings and held interviews and more during a three-day working visit. He has visited all the states (first round) to convince Malaysian voters (whom he has assiduously been wooing) to give Barisan Nasional a new five-year mandate to lead the nation into the new millennium.

His task appears easier now than at anytime during the last several months partly because of the economic recovery. The rural voters, who seemed ruffled by a combination of events which happened during the last year, seemingly are happier; accepting his explanation during his series of campaigns. He has promised to go on a second round of visits, and when he does perhaps he will remember that politics is already a service industry, like buying cars, either choosing a Proton Perdana or a Perodua.

During his first round of nation-wide tours Dr Mahathir has resisted the temptation of adopting political expediency and instead has scrupulously followed his and BN's well-tested philosophy. He has behind him a well-oiled juggernaut political machine. I believe, all being well, he will triumph again albeit with a reduced majority in popular voters, but still retaining BN's two-thirds majority in Parliament. This impression was strengthened following my conversations with what appeared to be a respected (and self-described) "objective Malay", a senior Umno politician. He told me: "There is no doubt there has been an erosion of Malay support particularly in the Malay heartlands and the federal capital but we will win, insya Allah (God willing)".

As BN's fortune soars and the advantage of incumbency remains, Mahathir last week came to New York, to address the 54th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), his first since 1996 when Tan Sri Razali Ismail, then Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the UN, was the president of the 51st UNGA. Notwithstanding the UNGA address I would say the climax of the visit was his speech to a packed audience at the influential Council on Foreign Relations where Anwar in April last year got a standing ovation when, in a thinly disguised implied critique against the Government of which he was second-in-command, said: "We should not try to restore the status quo ante. Not only would it be an exercise in futility but it would also constitute an act of denial." Anwar's talent has always been public relations. He beguiled the audience. The Americans and the IMF were happy. Dr Mahathir cleverly seized the audience, in Dr Mahathir (risque) idioms, he pounded home the message he wanted heard and passed on:

"Malaysia will soon go to the polls. The voters have two choices: Continue to support us who have provided stability, peace and prosperity or the alternative coalition whose most powerful core is the supposed Islamic PAS whose openly stated agenda is the establishment of its particular version of an Islamic state.

"In the run-up to Malaysia's 10th general election we see a level of foreign intervention not witnessed since the 1964 general elections when Indonesia and the Communists sought to abort the birth of Malaysia. Foreigners, including many in the US, who now seek to promote and support the Opposition should have a clear understanding of the strategic options: either the modernist, progressive, tolerant, liberal, tried and tested Umno-led Barisan Nasional stable coalition with a spectacular track record or a loose coalition of parties dominated by a deviationist Islamic PAS, whose record of performance as a Government is there for all to see in the state of Kelantan".

At the UNGA, Dr Mahathir, in a wide-ranging attack on the international system, accused "liberal democrats" of steering rebellion in developing countries as communists have done before them, adding, "The destruction of Eastern block (communist power) was complete. It could never again militarily challenge the Western Liberal democratic free marketeers. Now there would be one choice for the world and no defection would be possible for the countries of the world, big or small." Like in 1990 he got a standing ovation which lasted several minutes. What he stated has struck a genuine chord with all delegates except those from the First World.

Dr Mahathir's dialogue with 200 representatives of Malaysians living in and around New York (believed to be in thousands) was touching, could be a model for future meetings, where patriotic Malaysian expatriates expressed support and appreciation to the Government for "turning around" the nation economically. A rare display of pride of being Malaysians, a jubilant manifestation of national strength and harmony. He told them that Malaysia is not in tatters and internationally isolated, the economy is recovering; the forecast by various international analysts and institutions including

the World Bank is that Malaysia's economy will grow in excess of 3 per cent, and some predict as high as 5.5 per cent for 1999. However, Tun Daim, the First Minister of Finance, said the Government would remain cautious and conservative by sticking to our own estimate of the 1 per cent growth. The IMF forecasts our growth will be 2.14 per cent, more than half of our own estimate. What a change and what optimism!

Dr Mahathir, for better or worse, has painted the world in which Malaysians have lived for almost eighteen years now. They must try to sustain and perpetuate the good life and prosperity that came with his leadership, Surely, the majority of Malaysians have not forgotten the traumatic events of 1969. I know an entire generation of Malaysians growing up with only dim memories or none at all of the race riots which must appear to them as an old story that has evaporated during the long prosperous years.

Looking back now at the post years of the 1969 race riots, it is astonishing as to how much faith the Malaysians have invested in the Barisan Nasional Government. I am certain, sooner than later, in the first decade of the new century a new generation of daringly enlightened Malaysian leaders will have risen, who will outshine all their predecessors.

Dr Mahathir was visibly displeased with Australia's leading role in East Timor and said so to Kofi Annan, the secretary-general of the UN. He stressed: "Asean should lead the peace keeping job in Timor Timor. The Aussie soldiers are rather high handed and belligerent". What he said enraged the Aussies but pleased Malaysians who recalled what Paul Keating said of Dr Mahathir several years ago that Dr Mahathir was a recalcitrant or keras kepala. Dr Mahathir was not alone in advocating restraint from the Aussie soldiers. The Thai Foreign Minister, Surin Pitsuwan, also said that Asian troops would be more gentle than the rough Aussies.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra founded modern Malaysia, Tun Razak gave the disadvantaged a new deal and Dr Mahathir prosperity and freedom from a sense of inferiority which makes us feel proud to be Malaysian. No mean achievement after only 42 years of Merdeka. Still, while patriotism and passions are running high, we must not lose sight of our larger and long-term relationships, security and objectives.

Dr Mahathir is intensely disliked by the West because they think he is an 'authoritarian', too independent, and most unMalaysian in his frank and confrontational style. They want us all to be polite and servile like our subjugated ancestors. We know what happens to political eunuchs and political lapdogs. Do we want a eunuch or poodle for a leader?

Our hitherto success is the result of the cooperation and support of the majority of Malaysians. They created and sustained the present well-tested-broad-based-moderate-multi-ethnic Government, and they will soon have powers to give it a fresh mandate. A wrong choice will open the nation to great risk.

"I do not believe Dr Mahathir (a study of a profile in courage) will shirk his responsibility. He will do whatever it takes to enhance the present level of national unity, solidarity, peace and prosperity to new heights".

And our role? I suppose, it will be like what John Kennedy once urged the Americans to do: Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.

I have learnt that how a person looks at his audience and how he responds to them says a lot about the speaker. Dr Mahathir performed very well in Manhattan. He was impassioned, not how he said it, which carried the day during the meeting with the Malaysian expatriates especially.