

16/07/2001

Driven by passion for nation

Ramlan Said; Sarban Singh

IF there is one person who can be credited for Malaysia's achievements today, he is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest serving Prime Minister.

He celebrates 20 years in office today.

Dr Mahathir became Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister on July 16, 1981, when he took over from Tun Hussein Onn who resigned for health reasons.

Of the previous Prime Ministers, the country's first, Tunku Abdul Rahman was the longest in office with 13 years of service.

If Tunku Abdul Rahman is known as Bapa Kemerdekaan (Father of Independence), Tun Razak Hussein Bapa Pembangunan (Father of Development), and Tun Hussein Onn Bapa Perpaduan (Father of Unity), Dr Mahathir is widely regarded as Bapa Malaysia Moden (Father of Modern Malaysia).

From a country dependent on commodities such as rubber and tin, he has transformed Malaysia into what it is today - industrialised, vibrant, dynamic and one which draws the attention of the world to developing countries.

Not bad at all for someone who has been labelled, among others, a dictator and an autocrat, maha firaun (the great pharaoh), renegade, recalcitrant and heretic for his refusal to conform to economic norms.

When the country attained independence in 1957 after some 450 years of colonisation, Malaysia was poor and divided, with facilities lacking in almost every aspect.

But today, over a span of just 43 years, it is one of the world's top producers of microchips and a major exporter of electronic products.

Per capita income has risen from US\$300 (RM1,140) after independence to US\$4,000. Countries which gained independence at or around the same time as Malaysia found it difficult to match her economic prosperity.

The country registered impressive growth for eight consecutive years before it was temporarily halted by the 1997/98 financial crisis.

The world's tallest building, the Petronas Twin Towers, is a sight to behold while a visit to the new federal administrative centre of Putrajaya, the cyber city Cyberjaya and the ultra modern Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang will evoke pride and admiration.

These projects may have come under heavy criticism but the reality is they symbolise an independent and modern Malaysia, and that Malaysians are as capable as the other races in the world.

When Malaysia built the F1 circuit in Sepang and bid for the right to host the event, many were optimistic and enthusiastic.

All worked hard to bring the prestigious sports event here, now entering its third year in Malaysia. The success in staging the race proved Malaysia's organisational skill.

Had the idea been mooted 20 years ago, Malaysians would have been ridiculed as daydreamers.

Dr Mahathir has played a pivotal role in inculcating and injecting a sense of confidence and pride in the people. He desires to see the country and its people respected by everyone.

He is also driven by a passion for Malaysians to do better and to raise the country's image abroad.

Having lived under the British and the Japanese occupation, Dr Mahathir says he knows what it is like to be colonised.

He is determined to "free" the country from any form of colonisation, be

it political or economic.

He has reminded Malaysians that once the economy is surrendered to those bent on dominating the country, Malaysia will lose its independence.

Dr Mahathir is also known for his zeal and dedication to work, perhaps shaped by his upbringing.

"My father was very strict and serious about studies. That's why I sometimes cannot comprehend the attitude of our students now towards education," he commented recently on the poor performance of Malay students.

Dr Mahathir's boundless energy has also amazed many. Three or four official engagements a day is the norm rather than exception.

When visiting the States, he always keeps a hectic pace, with numerous stops and functions as well as speeches.

"His schedule is punishing," says a journalist, wondering where Dr Mahathir finds the energy to stay on his feet, sometimes for hours on end.

Try asking those assigned to cover him, like during election campaigns, and many will admit that they are unable to keep pace with him despite being much younger.

A participant at a dialogue recently asked the Prime Minister what kept him going and his secret for looking young.

Dr Mahathir, who turns 76 this December, replied: "If you have the interest and enjoy what you do, you will not feel tired."

Unlike some people, the Prime Minister says he is blessed with the ability to sleep anywhere, be it in a car or on a plane miles up in the sky.

Relations between the public and private sectors have been brought to greater heights under his administration, actively pursued under the Malaysia Incorporated concept.

Dr Mahathir feels the public sector should help the private sector as much as possible because when the latter makes more money, the Government will earn more through taxes.

"The public sector should cast away the perception that businessmen are their enemies. On the contrary, we should regard them as partners in developing the country," he once said.

Of the many projects initiated by Dr Mahathir, Proton must rank as the closest to his heart.

When he announced that Malaysia would manufacture its own car, there were numerous sceptics.

"Nak buat jarum pun tak tahu, inikan pula kereta" (Even producing needles is beyond our ability, what more cars).

Comments like this summed up the lack of confidence then in Malaysia's capability, as many did not believe the country was able to join the ranks of the world's car manufacturers.

But the number of Proton cars on the road today, not only at home but also in dozens of other countries, speaks volumes of Dr Mahathir's vision and long-term strategy in transforming Malaysia into an industrialised nation.

Another project which received the close attention of the Prime Minister was Langkawi, which was declared a duty-free area in 1987.

Local and foreign visitors to the island off Kedah would be impressed by the transformation, from a rural backwater dotted with padi fields and rubber estates into a land of hotels, resorts and a string of tourist attractions - the biennial Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace show being one of them.

Dr Mahathir has been a vocal critic of the negative elements of globalisation and liberalisation, concepts actively propagated by the West and rich nations. This sometimes creates the impression that he is anti-

globalisation.

Clarifying on many occasions that the perception is misplaced, the Prime Minister says his main concern is the ill-effects of globalisation, such as the unregulated movement of funds and currencies which can destroy and impoverish nations in a matter of days.

The worries are not without basis and Malaysia has seen and experienced the setbacks. The 1997 regional financial crisis was clear proof of the havoc greedy currency traders could wreak on economies and countries.

Dr Mahathir's far-sightedness and courage to face the world on his own were clearly apparent when Malaysia decided to impose selective capital controls to shield the economy from external threats.

He was swiftly labelled a heretic and Malaysia condemned a pariah in the world economy.

But as the economy bounced back - it registered an impressive growth of 6.1 per cent in 1999 and 8.3 per cent last year - Malaysia's staunchest critics including financier George Soros were forced to eat humble pie and admit that Malaysia had taken the right prescription to cure its economic ills.

Detractors, who at one time spoke ill of the country, started to praise the measures, vindicating Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir is recognised as a spokesman for developing countries, which according to him, is made possible because of Malaysia's economic achievements.

He believes Malaysia has earned the right to speak for the "downtrodden" and oppressed nations of the South.

The various awards and recognition from dozens of countries are testimony to his leadership.

It is no secret that leaders of developing countries look up to him for guidance.

Thailand awarded him the Knight Grand Cordon (Special Class) Of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant; Pakistan conferred the Nishan I-Quaid-I-Azam Awards (Supreme Leader) in 1983; the South Korean President bestowed on him the Grand Gwang Hwa Medal, the Diplomatic Order of Merit First Class in 1984; and Mali gave him its highest Award-Grand Cross of National Order.

The Prime Minister has also received state honours from Jordan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkmenistan, India, Lebanon, Kuwait, South Africa, Albania, Bahrain, Venezuela, Djibouti, Chile, Argentina and Japan.

In 1997, Saudi Arabia presented to him the King Faisal International Prize, its version of the Nobel Peace Prize. This award, in recognition of Dr Mahathir's service to Islam, was significant as it was seen as a testimony to his work and leadership in the Islamic world.

On Oct 3, 1991, he was accorded the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland.

Back home, the Malaysian Youth Council named him the "Architect of Modern Malaysia" in 1992.

In his political career spanning 50 years, Dr Mahathir is among those who can be said as having gone through the mill, including the bitter experience of being in the political wilderness.

On Sept 26, 1969, he was expelled from Umno due to differences with party leaders but was re-admitted on March 7, 1972.

He served as deputy president from 1978 to 1980, and has been the president since 1981.

Dr Mahathir has also tasted defeat as a candidate in a general election.

He first contested in the 1964 general election for the Kota Star Selatan parliamentary seat and won by a majority of 4,210 votes against Mohd Shaari Abd Shukor of PMIP.

In 1969, he lost the seat to Yusof Rawa of PMIP by a majority of 989 votes. He was appointed Senator in 1973.

However, he made a comeback in 1974 when he won the Kubang Pasu seat uncontested. He has been its elected representative since then.

In his 20 years as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has faced numerous tribulations and setbacks but he weathered the storms, such as the painful decision he had to make in sacking his former deputy and anointed successor Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir has said that he had intended to pass the baton to Anwar in 1998 but the economic crisis and sacking forced him to reconsider his retirement plans.

Anwar is now serving sentences totalling 15 years for corruption and sodomy, an episode that some argued has smeared the Prime Minister's track record.

Dr Mahathir has also said that the 1999 general election was probably his last.

There are those who like to see him leave the political scene but there are also an equal, if not greater number who want him to continue leading the country.

They say "Perjuangan Yang Belum Selesai" (Unfinished Struggle), a line made famous by Dr Mahathir, aptly reflects why his leadership is still required.