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Fuller full og half-truths

Paddy Schubert; Hardev Kaur

ON June 13, the International Herald Tribune published an article by Thomas Fuller on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, prompted by the forthcoming anniversary of his 20th year as Prime Minister.

The charitable view of the Tribune article is that it is hostage to the distant view of Malaysia. To Malaysians themselves it was above all inexplicable. We find it difficult to recognise or reconcile the gospel according to Fuller with the actual man or the country as we know. It would have been laughable if it had not been so deeply offensive.

One cannot ignore he manifests prejudice. Dr Mahathir seems to have attained pariah status. It has become commonplace to highlight and grossly exaggerate the perceived shortcomings of this man and his regime. We of course appreciate that Dr Mahathir is news, the welcome bad news that sells newspapers.

In 1997, when the financial contagion ravaged the economies of Southeast Asia, one after the other, the leaders of the crisis-hit countries succumbed. The sole survivor was Dr Mahathir Mohamed. One has to ask why?

Likewise the Malaysian economy, despite its heretic image, has emerged from the ordeal in better shape than its more economically orthodox neighbours. It registered 8.5 per cent GDP growth last year, back to pre-crisis levels when under Dr Mahathir's leadership, it registered minimum eight per cent growth for nine successive years. One has to ask why? He must be doing something right.

Peace and stability are prerequisites for progress. And now elsewhere in Asean we see the leadership once more in deep crisis. This time it is a political contagion. The adrenalin of so-called people power has instigated rampage in Manila, riots, rape, pillage and murder in Indonesia.

Our neighbours provide a salutary warning. Racial and religious conflagrations are what we need least in this very multi-racial society of ours.

In fact the answer to many of Fuller's charges and the context in which it is necessary to understand Malaysia, is that everything gets back to preserving our race relations. Fuller himself sees these as exemplary a beacon. And rightly so. In a century torn apart by racial and religious strife from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka to Bosnia, Dr Mahathir deserves to go down in history for his successful multi-racial synthesis and his enlightened, tolerant and secular Muslim regime.

Far from being undemocratic, we prefer the majority verdict of the ballot box in free and fair elections, to mob rule. Taking to the streets (by a minority) we regard as both unconstitutional and inimical to law and order.

As law-abiding citizens, we welcome the vigilance with which illegal demonstrations are contained. In the handling of these, we prefer due process to brute force, resorting to water cannons rather than guns or truncheons. Malaysians get wet, not dead. Individual troublemakers who flout the law are arrested as a security measure and dealt with according to the law.

Developed countries too resort to the strong arm of the law to deal with protesters, be it in Seattle, Washington or Melbourne. The European leaders we note are set to use their own version of draconian measures to counter the anticipated threat of violence from anti-capitalist agitators

at the G8 Summit. Does one detect an element of double standards at work here?

The alleged Press control has also to be seen in the context of the overarching concern for social stability. Inflammatory reporting that plays up racial issues puts in jeopardy our hard-won racial accord. In this situation the national Press, recognising the need to be more circumspect, is voluntarily restrained rather than directed and accepts a responsibility in this matter as a bounden duty.

No such cautionary or conscientious considerations constrain the foreign Press. If there was truly Press control, the IHT article would never have seen the light of day in this country.

We have learned not to expect any charity from the foreign media. All the more credit therefore to the IHT for designating Dr Mahathir as the "Great Builder" albeit qualifying the compliment. The description is apt, if taken in too limited a sense of only the physical infrastructure he has put in, among the best and most advanced in the whole region. We should add, continuing the metaphor, that he is also the country's foremost economic architect and a superlative nation-builder.

Charity, we are afraid, in Fuller's article stops there. There is much else that is frankly scurrilous and calls for a response. We first take the contradictions. Speaking for instance (and several times) of a climate of fear yet characterising the regime as paternalistic which means fatherly.

Contrary to what Fuller's article implies, there is a healthy, vociferous and active Opposition. The writer should know. He chose to interview in a totally one-sided political poll, only leading opponents of the Government who were predictably outspoken, openly critical and in no way cowed. To the contrary they provided a demonstration of the spirited democracy, which is Malaysia.

We have to take even more serious issue with the infamous suggestion that Dr Mahathir has destroyed democracy. As this was intended as a reprise of his 20 years in power may we take you back to when he took office.

His very first step was to democractise Umno - and therefore the system of premiership. Up to then his predecessors had single-handedly chosen their successor. Dr Mahathir declined to use this privilege, opening up the succession to a democratic party contest. By the same token he opened up himself to challenge, suffered the same, and legitimised himself in the party elections.

Democracy is alive and well in Malaysia and ahead of most of the region still groping with the first tentative moves to adopt it. Singapore and Malaysia are the only two countries who hold a full-fledged Westminster-style parliamentary election every five years since Independence, hotly contested and in no way rigged. Malaysia's independent Election Commission and international observer bodies make sure of that.

Dr Mahathir submits himself to the will of the people like everyone else. So far the democratic process has vindicated him and endorsed his leadership as the majority wish of the Malaysian people. Abraham Lincoln would approve.

Nor is it correct to say he has "destroyed the system of succession". It is the tradition in Umno to prepare for a smooth orderly transition when the time comes, by having the successors in place at the second and third levels down. The system is still very much in place. Dr Mahathir has anointed Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his heir apparent.

The next jibe was that the Government is "losing elections". We find it inexcusable to make such assertions contrary to the facts that are there for all to see. The present Barisan Government has won every single

general election since Independence, the last five under Dr Mahathir.

And with never less than a two-thirds majority - the kind of result we imagine George Bush or Al Gore would have given an arm and leg for. It requires votes from all communities to gain that level of majority in the House. Malaysians can reach a remarkable consensus. In the last election in November 1999, the post-crisis Government again retained its overwhelming lead.

Far from "abandoning" Dr Mahathir, he was given a fifth mandate. This was reaffirmed only recently when Umno, the leading party in the Barisan Nasional, had its annual general assembly - the mechanism, if needed, to challenge the leadership and thereby the leadership of the country. This did not happen. Dr Mahathir was fully endorsed.

Of course Fuller may be confusing "election" with the odd "by-election". Of the latter, there have been three since the 1999 polls. The Government lost one and won two - the same two-thirds ratio. It is true the Opposition, while still in a minority position, did better in the last election. If suppressed, as Fuller suggests, it could not have made the gains it did. We have an active, healthy, vocal opposition, thank you.

It is on the subject of what he calls Dr Mahathir's "darker" side that Fuller's allegations get wilder and his language more emotive than rational.

Here we can only apply the test of logic. Far from our institutions being "decayed", Dr Mahathir has set up additional ones like the Human Rights Commission. Corruption, says Fuller, is spreading. The Umno president has just suspended 15 office bearers found guilty of trying to use money politics in the party elections.

Dissent, says Fuller, is "repressed" and politically the country on the verge of "paralysis". Yet in the next breath he talks of mounting "demands" from lawyers, businessmen, politician and Chinese voters. Dissent is alive and well in Malaysia. "Demands" do not exactly accord with his assertion that Malaysians lower their voices when speaking on political issues. In fact a reduction ad absurdum is reached when he claims Malaysians shun speaking English or Malay to avoid detection.

This is to suggest, that since only 26 per cent of the population is Chinese, the other 75 per cent of Malaysians are unable to resort to Mandarin - therefore don't speak at all. Politics is the perennial subject of conversation in this country in all the tongues.

Fuller is right to claim Dr Mahathir has been the foremost exponent of the Internet in Malaysia. He did it in full cognisance that censorship is impossible. To further suggest that he sent Malaysian students to study in the West without realising the effect of exposure to Western culture, is to seriously underestimate his intelligence.

But probably the most damning insinuation in the article are the allegations of a police state. The Prime Minister, does not, as Fuller believes, control the police. This is the responsibility of the Home Minister.

The instrument of the ISA, a law introduced by the British, is intended to be used for security purposes when there is an immediate threat. Dr Mahathir's record in this respect is impeccable. Protesters arrested during the recent spate of demonstrations were invariably released within two to three days when tension was defused. The good doctor knows how to lower the temperature especially when it reaches fever pitch.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was initially arrested, also under the ISA in the context of the biggest demonstration of all, and held for eight days (arrested on Sept 20 and produced in court on Sept 29, 1998) before being charged in court and brought to open trial. The 1987 incident was again a response to a threat of race riots.

We readily concede that Dr Mahathir's rhetoric is not to everyone's liking. His outspoken style, it is true, does not reflect the usual Malay culture of reticence and a non-confrontational approach. It is in fact, more in the tradition of tell-it-like-it-is advocated in the West, and one would have thought, welcomed by the West.

But perhaps some people do not like a taste of their own medicine. Even Dr Mahathir does not match the belligerence of Fuller in this article. Dr Mahathir, moreover, normally a courteous shy and halus (refined) Malay gentleman, resorts to antagonism for strategic purposes.

A small inconsequential country like Malaysia cannot participate in the councils of the world's key power players. It can only hope to get a voice in the global debate to draw attention to the needs and concerns of the developing world. And even then in order to be heard, it has to shout loudly. If it means appearing personally obnoxious in order to secure that attention for Malaysia, Dr Mahathir is prepared to be as outspoken as his critics in the West. If this causes resentment in the home of allegedly free speech, we once again detect double standards at work.

Finally we need to clarify what really happened when Lee Kuan Yew recently crossed the Causeway for the first time in 10 years. His purpose was to support Dr Mahathir, the only Malaysian Prime Minister, he has declared, to whom he can relate.

Lee himself has gone on record publicly that he was not criticising the Malaysian leader. He indeed spoke of the errors of judgment involved in the Anwar business, making a subtle distinction between clumsy handling of the affair rather than downright villainy.

In fact the Singapore Senior Minister, in his concluding remarks on that occasion, singled out for special praise the great individual leaders of the world like Churchill, Roosevelt and de Gaulle. In clear reference he placed Dr Mahathir in the category of outstanding politicians and urged Malaysians, "When a man raises up a society, you must honour him".

Malaysians are in no doubt that Dr Mahathir has raised up our society. What we would wish for him is due recognition and the opportunity to make an honourable exit at a time of his choosing.