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Once-a-Lifetime Asean award for Dr Mahathir

Ashraf Abdullah in Singapore

CONFERRING the Once-a-Lifetime Asean Achievement Millennium Award on both Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew last night, the Asean Business Forum paid tribute to the former for turning Malaysia from an agricultural nation into the fourth-most industrial economy on earth.

"When objective historians write of the great men and women of Asia of the 20th Century, there seems little doubt a few names will inevitably stand out: Mahatma Gandhi of India, Mao Tse-tung and Deng Xiao Ping of China, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia," the ABF said in a citation read by eye surgeon Prof Arthur Lim, a long-time friend and a college mate of Dr Mahathir when they were students at the King Edward Medical College in Singapore.

The citation was read at a special award presentation ceremony at the Ritz Carlton Singapore.

Lim said these sons of Asia were all different in manner and mission, in character and temperament. "But they were all 'unreasonable' revolutionaries - driven by impossible dreams, possessed by unreasonable vision, committed to what so obviously could not be done.

"And they all commanded the ground long enough to plant the seeds, to nourish the plant, to see impossible dreams and unreasonable vision well on the way to reality.

"For Dr Mahathir, the objective historian might well say that he is not only the great Malaysian leader of the 20th Century but also the greatest Malay of the last 500 years."

Lim said over the last 30 years, 20 of which were under the Mahathir administration, Malaysia, according to United Nations statistics emerged as the world champion of poverty eradication.

"When Dr Mahathir came to power, the perennial problem of unemployment was still in the forefront of public economic policy. Under his premiership, economic growth substantially exceeded the income-doubling target of seven per cent.

"When Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister, Malaysia was an agricultural and extractive economy making promising strides with regard to industrialisation.

"Today, his country is the fourth-most industrial economy on earth, whether measured in terms of the deployment of labour, industrial contribution as a percentage of the gross domestic product, or manufactured goods as a percentage of exports.

"Dr Mahathir's job is still far from over: Perjuangan Masih Belum Selesai. The Mahathir Modernisation is not yet at an end, even as it will continue long after he is no longer in our midst," Lim said.

Reading the citation for Lee, Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute director and chief executive officer Datuk Dr Michael Yeoh said Lee was a man of courage.

"He built an economic environment conducive to business. Profit has never been a dirty word in Singapore. However, to his great credit, he has succeeded in giving everyone a stake in the country."