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Dr Mahathir has done us proud in many ways

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FOR Malaysian journalists it was difficult enough to meet their daily deadlines from overseas assignments but their task was made more difficult by the fact that very little was known about their country. Many mistook it be part of Africa and considered it to be among the "basket cases" and therefore not worthy of attention.

Journalists from other Asian countries, among them the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia, had better access to news sources as their countries were better known and deemed to be better developed.

But the situation has changed dramatically. Thanks to the efforts of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Not only has he helped put the country on the world map, he has also changed perceptions of the country and transformed the once primary commodity dependent economy to one that is close to attaining developed nation status. In some aspects Malaysia is a First World country today.

Dr Mahathir has given us shock treatment, cajoled, pushed, challenged, inspired, encouraged and made us work harder to strive for greater heights and achievements.

While some have often complained that he pushed us too hard and there was no free time for other pursuits, he pushed himself even harder.

It was for our own good. We learnt that we could achieve much more, reach greater heights and compete with the best in the world.

As a result, Malaysians now stand tall and hold their heads high. He has raised the national flag in places that many only read about in books and see in movies. It is indeed with a sense of pride that one now says "I am a Malaysian" in reply to queries of "Where are you from?"

But more than that, the views and opinions about Dr Mahathir have changed dramatically around the world. Increasingly perceptions of the "recalcitrant" leader are more conciliatory. Opinions have changed and they are more favourable towards the Prime Minister, of his policies and leadership.

The alternative and unorthodox policies that Malaysia pursued are now seen as having produced better results and being given the thumbs up.

The popularity, credibility and respect for Dr Mahathir as an individual, for his views and leadership, at home and abroad, has never been higher.

Even his most ardent critics grudgingly admit that he has done more for the country, regional stability and for an international understanding of the plight of the poor in more ways than people care to remember or even admit.

The most recent was during the financial crisis in 1997 when the policies, unorthodox and hardly textbook and IMF tested remedies caused the international community and multilateral institutions to review their actions and decisions. Currently the developed countries are adopting policies and laws on anti-terrorism and capital controls.

He has views which he is not afraid to articulate even if these do not coincide with those of the most influential and powerful in the world.

He is also very consistent and sticks to his convictions even though they may not be popular. He does not compromise, as some do, just because the views and opinions of the more powerful are different from his. He says what he has to say no matter whom he is dealing with.

He does not hesitate to take even his own people and race to task. He chastises and criticises them when he thinks they are not pulling up their socks. He has also been highly critical of the Muslim world for not doing enough.

Some analysts say he could help by acting as mediator in the Middle East conflict.

Undoubtedly as a moderate and rational Muslim leader he has shown that he has the best credentials and is viewed as the most credible Muslim leader.

He has led his country to a level of development that is the envy of many around the world and certainly a model for the Muslim world.

Dr Mahathir's views on terrorism and ways of resolving the international problems that confront the world are among the most sought-after. His views are held in high esteem in all quarters, developed, developing, Muslims and non-Muslims, presidents and religious leaders including the Pope.

A senior Australian journalist who spoke with an Israeli official last week in Sydney said even the Israeli official appreciated and respected Dr Mahathir's views on terrorism and the Middle East conflict, adding that they were relevant and important.

It did not matter to the Israeli that Dr Mahathir has strong views on Israel and its policies and leadership, which have come under severe criticism from the Malaysian leader who has been sympathetic of the Palestinian cause and their right for a state.

But this has not stopped him from criticising the suicide bombers. It only goes to show that Dr Mahathir is rational, fair and pragmatic on an issue that is highly sensitive and emotional.

His rationality and pragmatism has also been demonstrated in his handling of domestic issues. Someone who has been labelled an "ultra" and a "rebel" is loved and respected by all Malaysians irrespective of race, religion or age. He also has numerous admirers abroad some of whom hoped and wished that they had Dr Mahathir as their leader.

Yet others claimed he was a "dictator". He is a nationalist who put the country and his people above all else. Undoubtedly he would have hoped to achieve much more and push his countrymen to even greater heights. But by any measure Dr Mahathir's achievements are admirable.

He has chartered the roadmap for the country's development with his Vision 2020 and spelled out an orderly transition, unmatched anywhere, that does away with shocks and confusion providing for stability, certainty and continuity.

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