

04/08/2002

A non-conformist PM

Appa

Dear Son,

AGREED, if everyone was a non-conformist, there would be chaos in society. Conformists are essential for stability but, as I mentioned in my previous letter, some non-conformists are necessary for any society to progress. The best would be people who conform to most of society's values and mores, yet rise to challenge perceptions or activities that may not be ideal.

Now that you mention it, yes, certainly you are right. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a fine example of a non-conformist. Perhaps that is why he has been so successful. He challenged many perceptions and forms that existed during his 21 years as Prime Minister. After taking over, he decided to tackle time itself. He adjusted the hands of the clock by 30 minutes so that both West and East Malaysians shared a standard time.

Everyone had to take notice of this new man at the helm. And independent Singapore was forced to follow us. I believe there was a message in it for our neighbour too.

All our previous prime ministers had generally looked to the West for inspiration. One reason probably was that they had had their tertiary education in England. Mahathir looked in the opposite direction. His "Look East" policy was another jolt for Malaysians and the Western world. A non-conformist at work. The nation shifted focus. Having lapped up many things from one coloniser, we started learning from another. Suddenly, Japan was our best friend. We started looking at the Koreans too. Alas and alack, England - on whom the Malaysian sun too had now set - took a back seat.

Mahathir said Malaysians are capable of the best. Some believed him. One bunch went along to humour him. Some ridiculed him. He said we will have our own car. The sceptics had a good laugh. But the Proton arrived and today we are exporting cars. The tallest towers in the world were built. His enthusiasm fired up many people. Two Malaysians scaled Mount Everest, one sailed round the world and others carried out other feats of strength, courage and endurance.

Slowly, it struck home. That fellow was right after all. We can do things if we set our minds and hearts to it. The cry went our loud and clear: Malaysia Boleh. And gradually "that fellow" became "our beloved PM".

A classic non-conformist.

The economic crisis hit us. Pundits said we should tighten our belts and take the IMF's medicine to survive. The good doctor from Kedah said, "you keep your medicine. I will concoct something else for my nation".

He encouraged spending, introduced currency controls and pegged the Ringgit to the US dollar. Many were shocked. It's the end of Malaysia, some said. He has gone crazy, others opined. But we came out of it well. And others began to ask how the Mahathir medicine was made. Certainly this is the style of a non-conformist. And who can forget his tussle with royalty. He not only shook up the royals but Malaysians' view of royalty as well. Only a non-conformist could have done that.

Then he did the unthinkable. This leader of a tiny nation of 22 million people criticised the superpower. Not once, but many times. And if he felt the West was wrong, he said so.

Then at a gathering of Muslim leaders from all over the world in KL, where sympathy for the Palestinians ran high, this Malaysian Muslim leader

said Muslim suicide bombers who caused the death of innocents should also be considered terrorists. That took tremendous courage. Only a non-conformist could have done it.

Many feel he is Malaysia's best Prime Minister. Others say under him democracy was disrobed and placed in chains. There are those who feel gratitude for what he has done. Others seethe at the sight of him.

By studying the reaction of people to him, we can learn more about human nature. Some praise his accomplishments, others point out his mistakes. Look up at the Twin Towers, say some. Look down at the misery of those he has trampled under the ISA, say others. See how caring he is, some say. He is a dictator, claim others. Look how much plenty and progress he has brought, say some. See how far back he has set the judiciary, say others..

This, Son, is a good lesson for you. We can never please everyone. And Mahathir certainly knows this.

God bless you,

Appa

The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden
flight, But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the
night. - Longfellow