

# A qualified success

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On balance, Dr Mahathir has done well by Malaysia. But he should not linger

BY HIS own exacting standards, Dr Mahathir should probably be rated a failure. Barring a miracle, it is hard to see how the plans he outlined for Malaysia in a speech made in 1992, which became known as the "Vision 2020", could possibly be realised. The main goal he set out was that by 2020 Malaysia should become a "fully developed country", meaning that its income per head should get close to that of the 30 countries of the OECD. But last year the country's GDP per head was around \$3,900, against an OECD average of \$23,100, and the gap is widening.

The other targets in the "Vision 2020" are scarcely less ambitious, and equally unlikely to be accomplished. Malaysia has done well in fostering racial harmony in difficult circumstances, but in a land where discrimination remains legally embedded in most walks of life, a "united Malaysian nation" is still a long way off. A third great challenge, of "fostering a mature democratic society", remains unmet too, as the treatment of Anwar Ibrahim and of the Keadilan opposition attests.

But it is unfair to judge Dr Mahathir by his own criteria. By less stringent ones, his rule has, on balance, been a time of success for Malaysia, especially when compared with neighbours such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, all of which have known worse government and weaker economic performance.

## A larger canvas?

On October 23rd, days before he steps down, Dr Mahathir will welcome the other 55 members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to Putrajaya for their triennial summit meeting. One task for the summit may be to choose the next secretary-general of the OIC in succession to Abdelouahed Belkeziz, who is likely to stand down at the end of next year. Dr Mahathir must be the leading candidate for the job if he wants it.

He would be a good choice. Dr Mahathir is the nearest thing on offer to a candidate who can bridge the chasm of misunderstanding between the Islamic and the western worlds. Although he has at times been famously critical of the West, his country, unlike most other OIC mem-

bers, shares many western values. Malaysia is a democracy, if an imperfect one, which is true of only a very few Islamic countries. It is also tolerant of other religions, as many OIC members are not. It embodies a secular, modern Islam.

Most important, Malaysia is an economic success story, well integrated into the world trading system, and steadily increasing the living standards of its people. One of the principal sources of the new Christian-Muslim divide is the economic failure of most Islamic states, and the resentment of the West that this naturally if mistakenly breeds. Despite its government's heavy-handedness, Malaysia offers a good role model for the rest of the OIC.

Installing Dr Mahathir in Jeddah, where the OIC is based, would have another great advantage, for Malaysia at least: it would get him out of the country. The idea that he might install himself as a sort of honorary president-for-life, as Lee Kuan Yew has done in Singapore, is unappealing. His successor will need the freedom to make changes, such as loosening the over-cosy links between UMNO and business, easing the government's iron grip on the press and releasing people who are, in effect, political prisoners.

Even if he takes no formal title, Dr Mahathir is hardly likely to fade away. He has already tried to impose his choice of future



It hurts to say goodbye

deputy prime minister on his successor, though Mr Badawi has so far held firm. He has also said that he may remain an MP.

According to an old joke, the difference between Malaysia and Britain is that in Britain the prime minister is chosen every five years and the monarch rules for life; whereas in Malaysia the king changes every five years and the prime minister rules for life. There is some truth in that: since independence in 1957, Malaysia has had 12 kings (because the title rotates among Malaysia's sultans and rajas) but only four prime ministers. The greatest service Dr Mahathir could render Malaysia after all these years would be to retire, full stop. ■