

# The changing of the guard



After 22 years, Mahathir Mohamad says he is going. His successor must find a way to preserve his achievements but dispense with his authoritarianism, says Christopher Lockwood

AS YOU sit over your chicken *rendang*, with perhaps a dish of *kway teoh* lined up for afterwards, the food court on the second floor of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), in the shadow of the soaring Petronas Towers, is a fine place to observe everything that works best about Malaysia. The names of the various stalls—Nasi Padang, Hainanese Chicken Rice, Panggang Delights, North & East Indian Cuisine—are the gastronomic manifestation of Malaysia's extraordinary multiculturalism. Nowhere else in the world can you find the dominant ethnic group (here, the *rendang*-loving Malays, who make up about 53% of the population) living so amicably with such a big and economically powerful minority (the *hway teoh*-eating Chinese, about 26%, not to mention the Indians, another 8%). In 1998, when the Asian crisis sent Malaysia's national income crashing by almost 8%, and next door in Indonesia hundreds of Chinese were being lynched by jealous Indonesians, Malaysia's Chinese went unscathed.

Then there are the women. Many of those who swarm around the KLCC's shops and eateries wear the *tudong*, the local version of the *chador*, tightly framing the face. But the *tudong* is often accompanied by figure-hugging jeans or T-shirts of which the religiously conservative would surely not approve. Nor is there any attempt to impose the *tudong* on non-Muslims, be they the local Chinese or foreign-

ers. Pork and alcohol are freely available.

Nor can the KLCC itself fail to impress the visitor. It is not just the \$1,000 jackets at Ermenegildo Zegna, or the 50-inch plasma flat-screen television sets at Sony World, but the quality of the infrastructure: the light railway that glides away to the rest of Kuala Lumpur and connects to a high-speed train that hurtles you out to the gleaming new international airport, 60km (38 miles) away along a cabled-up "Multimedia Super Corridor"; or the bristling forest of skyscrapers, crowned by the needle-thin Petronas Towers, which must rank among the most magnificent office buildings on any continent. It would be easy to imagine that this is the capital of a rich country, not of a developing one with an income of under \$4,000 a head.

## The ifs and buts

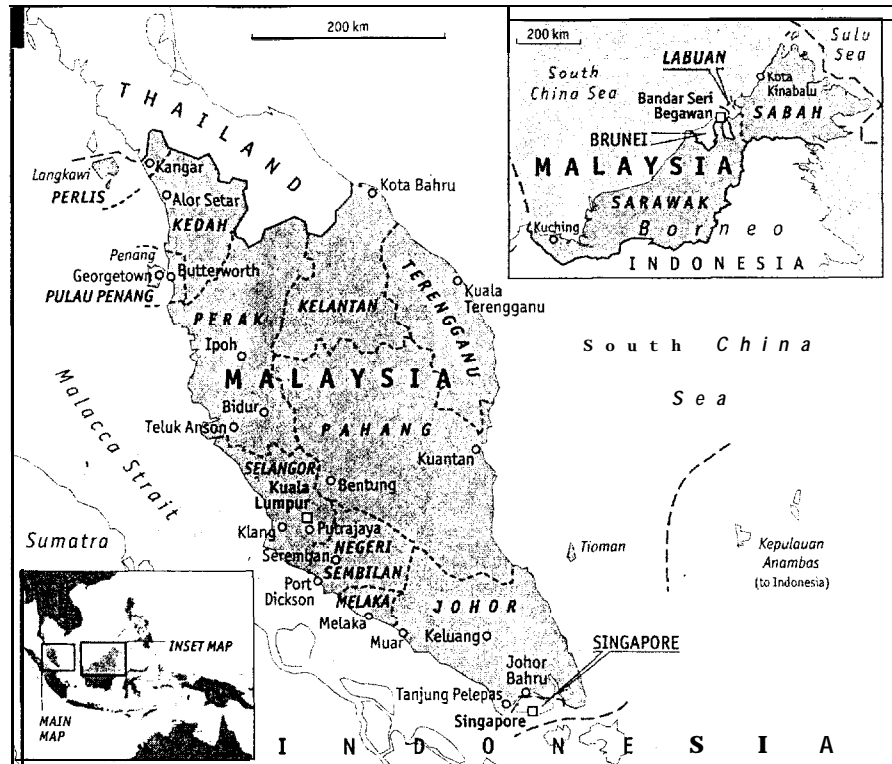
Yet look a little more closely, even here at the heart of Malaysia's success story, and the picture becomes more clouded. Start with those glittering towers. True, one of them is fully occupied, but that is only because Petronas, the government's oil company, has "chosen" to move so many of its staff into it. Petronas reports direct to the prime minister's office, and has often obliged the government before. In 1998, one of its subsidiaries bought out a troubled shipping company that belonged to none other than the prime minister's eldest son, an investment decision that raised more ▶▶

▶ than a few eyebrows. The second tower is half empty, and occupants complain that the offices, especially on the higher floors where the building tapers, are poky and full of awkward corners.

Or take the *tudong*: there are a lot more of them now than there were ten years ago, or even five. Wearing one is not compulsory, but women who immodestly reveal their hair encounter increasing pressure, even abuse. Two of Malaysia's 13 states already have Islamic governments, which are trying to impose laws permitting the amputation of thieves' hands and the stoning of adulterers. They have also cracked down on the sale of alcohol. At national level, the Islamic opposition quadrupled its representation in parliament at the most recent election.

And as for that famous multiculturalism, look again. You will see Chinese and Malays thronging into the food court, but only rarely in mixed groups. And you will probably wait in vain to see a Chinese-Malay couple: they are a rarity, involving compulsory religious education for the non-Muslim partner. The fact is that the two communities, though relations between them are civil enough, live their lives largely apart, attending different schools and universities, speaking different languages and working for different employers. Malaysia's political parties, in practice, are uniformly race-based. The government's vision of a "Malaysian race" by 2020 looks wildly premature.

Malaysia, in short, has achieved remarkable successes, but there is reason to worry that they are not yet solidly bedded down, and they certainly owe more than they should to tough government action. Criticise the policies that have hobbled the Chinese to help the Malays catch up, and you face a charge of sedition. Bring protesters out on the street, and you may be banged up in prison without charge. A proper debate on anything contentious is impossible because the press does pretty



much what it is told. Until September 11th 2001, the West regarded Dr Mahathir as something of a pariah because of the heavy-handed methods he employed against his opponents, though the attacks on America have turned him into a necessary ally in the war against terrorism.

Conservative Islam is a looming threat, at least in parts of the country, no matter how carefully government-licensed television stations ensure that all female presenters are tudong-less. The imprisonment (usually without charge) of scores of so-called radicals implies either that there is a genuine danger of subversion, which is alarming, or that the government is misusing its emergency powers, which is alarming in a different way. Race relations are mainly good, but there are simmering resentments. And although the economy has bounced back from the dark days of 1997-98, and some of the worst cronyist excesses have been cleaned up, it seems clear that the days of double-digit growth—fuelled by lavish foreign direct investment,

most of which has now been diverted to China—are gone for good. The more astute of Malaysia's commentators wonder how the country's 24m people will ever manage to change their status from developing to developed country.

**Guardian or jailer?**

That is why the transition on which Malaysia is about to embark is so important. In October, if he is to be taken at his word, Dr Mahathir will step down after 22 years as prime minister, far longer than any democratically elected leader in power anywhere else in the world. His chosen successor, Abdullah Badawi, currently the deputy prime minister, sometimes seems to be everything that Dr Mahathir is not: a cautious bureaucrat rather than a visionary; a conciliator, not a fighter; an unworldly descendant of clerical scholars with a degree in Islamic studies, rather than a technophile and moderniser. Although he is more than a decade younger than his boss, who is a terrifyingly active 77, Mr Badawi appears older and less vigorous. Is he up to the job of guarding Malaysia against the demons of religious extremism, racial hatred and a fragile and volatile global economy? Will he be able to dispense with the authoritarianism that, to many, has made Dr Mahathir look more like a jailer than a guardian of his people? And can he hold the fractious ruling coalition together, a job that even Dr Mahathir has sometimes found a struggle?

Mr Badawi's admirers argue that he is far tougher than he looks. For the past four years he has served as home minister, ▶▶

**I How Malaysia stacks up**

Selected indicators, 2001	Malaysia	Indonesia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
GDP per person, \$	3,640	680	1,050	24,740	1,970
Life expectancy, years	71.7	65.9	61.7	78.8	68.9
Health-care spending, % of GDP <sup>1</sup>	2.5	2.7	3.4	3.5	3.7
Computers per 100 people	13	1	2	51	3
Mobile phones per 100 people	31	3	15	72	12
Electricity (kWh) used per person <sup>2</sup>	2,474	345	454	6,641	1,352
Cars per 1,000 people <sup>3</sup>	147	12	10	122	2.7

Sources: World Bank; World Health Organisation; International Telecommunications Union; International Road Federation \*2000 †1999

▶ which means that his name has been on all the orders issued under Malaysia's Internal Security Act, the instrument for rounding up dozens of what the government calls dangerous militants and the opposition calls, for the most part, legitimate opponents. It is not an argument calculated to appeal to western liberals, but it carries some weight.

More palatably, they also say that Mr Badawi is well placed to try to win back support for the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which has been leaching away to the main Islamic opposition party, PAS. Thanks to his own religious qualifications, Mr Badawi can speak with greater authority-in

Arabic if need be-than Dr Mahathir does in defence of the government's secular version of Islam against PAS's charges of godlessness. Mr Badawi's modest private life and generally clean image may also go down well as a change from his predecessor, who is famous for spending hundreds of millions of dollars on dubious "mega-projects". These include Kuala Lumpur's half-empty new international airport, the Multimedia Super Corridor between the airport and the city, and the glittering new administrative capital he has built in Putrajaya, just outside Kuala Lumpur, complete with an over-the-top prime minister's palace which Mr Badawi would be well advised not to move into.

The smarter among Mr Badawi's supporters concede that cleaning up politics-or at least the perception of politics-will be their most pressing task come October. Mr Badawi has put together an impressive team of bright young people to plan for the handover, but the timing will be tight. A general election must be held by the end of 2004, and a poor result would spell an early end to Mr Badawi's prime ministership. UMNO politics are a snake-pit, as often happens when one party has monopolised power for too long, and at least two powerful challengers are already lining up. Above all, the election result will depend on how well Mr Badawi tackles the Islamic opposition. ■