

# 'Mahathir proved he is not anti-Chinese'

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Before Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became prime minister in 1981, his opponents had labelled him an "ultra Malay" and "anti-Chinese".

But 22 years later, as he prepares to retire, most Chinese have changed their minds.

"When Dr Mahathir was appointed deputy prime minister and earmarked for prime minister," recalled DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang, "there was considerable distrust and suspicion all round in view of *The Malay Dilemma* and his political record."

In his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, first published in 1970, Mahathir had called for "constructive protection" for the Malays.

He said the Malay dilemma was "whether the Malays should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if it blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little.

Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim, of Universiti Malaya's History Department, said Mahathir was among the "ultra" group which opposed Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"They believed the Tunku was not giving sufficient opportunities for the Malays in the economic sector," he said.

When Mahathir became the fourth prime minister, the non-Malays were worried that the Malays might take over their economic interests.

"But all that was forgotten by the 90s, when the economy boomed - mainly because of Mahathir's efforts to steer the country towards Vision 2020," said Khoo.

During his first 100 days, Mahathir met a wide cross-section of the Chinese community, including hosting visiting Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang.

He attended an MCA dinner in his honour and later launched the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall's 58th anniversary and National Day celebrations, promising to have more dialogues with the people and asking them to continue voicing their opinions on national problems.

In September, he opened the MCA general assembly, warning Barisan National parties not to disturb the status quo.

The day before, MCA Youth had called for a second deputy prime minister post to be given to the party.

Although he rejected their call, he took note of the other issues raised (on the appointment of more Chinese district officers and assistant district offi-

cers, overcoming citizenship problems of some non-Malays, etc.).

Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) president Tan Sri William Cheng said the Chinese business community had known Mahathir from his term as minister of trade and industry.

Some were not sure what new policies he would introduce and were a little concerned, but after a few years these fears disappeared.

Cheng, who is chairman and CEO of Lion Group, said Mahathir was seen as

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capable, aggressive and a bold decision-maker who could react fast when necessary, encouraging Malaysia to move from one level to the next.

"We really needed a prime minister like that. From 1988 to 1997, Malaysia had an average annual growth of 8-10%. If not for the Asian economic crisis, the economy would have grown further."

Education was the burning issue for the Chinese community in the 70s.

Lim said the non-Malays who felt there was no future for them in higher education here had to go overseas.

But by the late 80s and the 90s, there were more places in private colleges.

Lim said mother-tongue education was no longer under the "sword of Damocles" when the Education Act 1996 did away with the section empowering

the minister of education to close vernacular schools.

However, some Chinese educationists are still concerned.

Dr Kua Kia Soong, principal of the New Era College set up by the Chinese education movement Dong Jiao Zong, said the Unified Examination Certificates (UEC) from independent Chinese secondary schools are still not recognised for admission into government universities or the civil service.

The former DAP MP for Petaling Jaya said the new 1996 Education Act was not as good as the original 1961 Act, "which gave mother-tongue education the right to exist. Now it exists only at the behest of the education minister."

Khoo also noted that some Chinese believe that vision schools might be the first stage to changing the character of Chinese schools.

Lim, however, said there has been a "sea-change" in the Chinese perceptions of Mahathir.

"They now regard him as a moderate in stemming Islamic extremism."

He sees the 1995 general election more of a Mahathir victory in getting the Chinese votes, thanks to liberalisation on language, education, culture and the economy.

"In the 1999 general election, the Chinese were his saviour in getting the two-thirds majority in parliament."

One measure of the community's feelings is their plan for a private farewell dinner for Mahathir.

"He should not retire completely. If he has time, we hope he will use his influence and contacts to serve not only Malaysia but also the Third World," said Cheng. - Bernama