

Not long after he took office 22 years ago, I was ushered into the office of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for what was among his first interviews with the foreign press as prime minister. The 90-minute interview veered towards what was wrong with Malaysia that the new prime minister was trying to fix.

Even in his early days, Mahathir seemed determined to remake Malaysia in his very own template. Trying to draw him out a bit and get the juiciest of quotes, I sensed my opportunity as a young rookie foreign correspondent to pounce on him with queries. One moment he was saying there was nothing wrong with Malaysia the model Southeast Asian country and in the same breath he kept saying he needed to fix everything, change everything. "If it ain't broke, why fix it?"

It was red rag to a bull. It brought out the combatant in Mahathir who went on to lash out at the way western pressmen portrayed Malaysia, Asians and Muslims. As a Pakistani Muslim, representing an Asian publication, *Asiaweek* (before it was bought out by the US media giant Time Warner) I couldn't quite see what his point was because I had only pointed out the fact that he was contradicting himself. Yet his generic remarks were directed at a larger audience. As I followed up my questions, he got even more combative. Always a master of his craft, Mahathir was using my questions to point to contradictions in the way media handled things. Round One to Mahathir.

Much has been written about his love-hate relationship with the foreign press. Clearly, he often made great copy whenever he said anything at all. Editors lapped up everything he had to say. Readers applauded at everything the editors dished out with Mahathir quotes. Sure, some in the foreign press called him

# A favourite of the foreign press

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by ASSIF SHAMEEN

"big-mouthed" but it was really a term of endearment and not meant to be derogatory.

Why? You see, his quotes filled pages, sold newspapers and magazines while many of his contemporaries were so boring that even when they gave their once-in-a-decade exclusive interview they really didn't have much to say. A former colleague who interviewed President Suharto in the mid-80s said he struggled to find two paragraphs of readable text from the long transcript. Suharto could put good journalists to sleep.

I interviewed Mahathir 10 times over the past 22 years and had difficulty trying to keep the copy to three or four pages. Mahathir wasn't just eloquent or combative, he also made immensely readable copy.

His retirement truly marks the end of an era for Asia. Feisty, he might have been, but Mahathir was as much a man of vision and charisma. He takes his place in Asia's long list of long-serving leaders who shaped the destiny of their nations - the likes of Park Chung Hee of South Korea, Suharto of Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore all transformed their nations with a combination of vision and sometimes iron-fist, single-mindedly pursuing economic development to uplift their people.

Yet Park left office in a coffin after being assassinated, Suharto resigned following a popular uprising. Lee is still Senior Minister in the Singapore cabinet and awaits his son Hsien Loong's ascension to power. Mahathir is different in that he takes a bow with his head held up high. Indeed, he is walking off the stage smiling, having set his own course of retirement.

When I first visited Malaysia as a rookie reporter 23 years ago, the veteran foreign correspondents in Asia would tell me that Malaysia was

really a "political story". I would quietly sit sipping tea as they would list the big questions that were overhanging. Will there be a repeat of 1969 riots?

How long will Umno's dominance last? Will the New Economic Policy succeed in uplifting the Malays or will the social experiment fail the way forced transmigration in Indonesia was failing? Mahathir turned what was viewed as a once-slumbering Third World country dependent on commodities like

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palm oil, rubber and tin to a industrialising nation and powerhouse manufacturer of semiconductors and other electronic components.

From a political story he turned Malaysia into an economic story and all that goes with it. That meant being subject to vagaries of boom-and-bust industrial economic cycles. With its booming capital market came new issues like corporate governance and scandals. When foreign media lapped up these new stories, Mahathir again turned his guns on them not realising that by devoting so much space to Malaysia the foreign press was in a way heralding the arrival of Malaysia in the league of more prosperous nations.

As the curtain falls on 22 years of his often tempestuous leadership, the legacy of Mahathir era is becoming clearer. He instilled a sense of nationalistic pride among Malaysians. The new "can-do" spirit is being talked about even in the bars of Hongkong frequented by much derided foreign journalists. But like in any other nation there is still a lot of work that needs urgent attention.

Visionaries like Mahathir are often very good at creating the big picture but sometimes find the details too boring and mundane to attend to. Now that the edifice is complete, it's time to attend to the little details that may have been overlooked and to patch up those cracks.

Foremost among the problems his successor needs to address is the religious moderate-fundamentalist divide.

If you ask Mahathir, and I have asked him, he won't deny that he was authoritarian at times. But how else can you stay in office for so long and reshape the destiny of a people? True, his feisty anti-colonial diatribes rattled nerves from Washington to Canberra, from London to Riyadh but for Mahathir, rattling the sabre was not only a means to an end but also an end in itself. Malaysia wanted to be heard and to be noticed. Mahathir put it squarely on the map.

For all his faults, Mahathir does deserve credit where it is due: doing things in his own way. He might have seen foreign correspondents as protagonists in some sort of battle with leaders of developing world, but we in the press saw him as just good copy. Too good to ignore. To be sure, he will be sorely missed in newsrooms around the world.

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## 1984

- Mahathir removes Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah as finance minister after the latter loses the second Musa Hitam-Razaleigh contest in Umno elections.

- Sets the country's 70 million population target by 2105 and introduces the National Agricultural Policy to help raise the income of farmers by creating mini-plantations and improving management skills.

## 1985

- Pushes for Malaysia's industrialisation by launching the national car, Proton Saga.

## 1986

- In February, Musa resigns as deputy prime minister, citing differences in opinions and government policy matters. Mahathir appoints Umno pioneer (Tun) Ghafar Baba as DPM.

- Leads BN, for a second time, to a landslide electoral victory.

- Musa and Razaleigh form Team B and prepares to challenge Team A (Mahathir and Ghafar) for the Umno leadership.

## 1987

- Team A's narrow victory results in a major split in Umno and Malay unity in general. A purge of Team B follows.

- An Umno, weakened by unity, results in heightening of tensions over communal issues raised openly by community-based political parties and non-governmental organisations. Mass Internal Security Act (ISA) detentions under Operation Lallang see arrest of politicians and suspension of three newspapers.

- Declares Langkawi a duty-free island to promote it as an international tourist and event destination, like the biennial Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (Lima) Exhibition.

## 1988

- The continuous political tussles and manoeuvres result in Umno's deregistration. Mahathir swiftly forms Umno Baru with Team B dissidents shut out.

- The deregistration of Umno also results in a judicial crisis, with the impeachment of Supreme Court judges.

## 1989

- Malaysia hosts her first ever Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the new Putra World Trade Centre, thrusting the nation into the global spotlight, and her capabilities in hosting international conferences. Also introduces the Langkawi Declaration on environmental protection.

- Mahathir undergoes open-heart surgery in a government hospital as an endorsement of the capability of local surgeons.

## 1990

- Although Mahathir leads BN, for the third time, to another two-thirds majority victory in Parliament, BN loses Kelantan to PAS.

## 1991

- On Feb 28, Mahathir unveils Vision 2020 blueprint to steer Malaysia to developed nation status and introduces the National Development Policy (NDP) to replace the National Economic