

An excellent failure



Dr Mahathir constantly exhorted the Malays to improve themselves so that they would be able to compete in the international markets.

PARTLY because of his political longevity, but mostly because of the scale of his multiple ambitions for the country, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has accumulated an abundance of superlatives in his job as Malaysia's Prime Minister.

He is said to be the most visionary, the most intellectual, the most provocative, the most controversial, the most misunderstood and the most renowned Malaysian Prime Minister thus far. These qualities he has demonstrated.

Much of this has resulted from the ambitious goals he has set himself in transforming both the landscape of Malaysia and the mind-scape of Malaysians, and the sometimes unorthodox ways of achieving them. For better or worse, Prime Minister Mahathir will be remembered for the ends and means he chose to steer the coun-

Central to Dr Mahathir's work as Prime Minister is the task of transforming the Malay mindset. He admitted his failure in this last year, but other Malaysians may disagree. BUNN NAGARA traces the outlines and nuances of the issue and what it means for Malaysia. *STAR* 31 OCT 2003

tionists, and the trials Umno as a political party has weathered, as an organisation, it remains the central pillar of the Malay community.

The personality and convictions of Dr Mahathir himself further designated his career as a catalyst for changing the Malay. His book *The Malay Dilemma* sums it up, but his drive towards this end even predates authorship of the book.

His early differences with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the letter of dissent he sent the Tunku, and his subsequent expulsion from Umno were centred on his vision and way of seeking to change the Malays. Not only did he want to engineer this

industrialisation, and the overall development of the country depended on improved economic opportunities for Malays. Policy changes had to be wrought for the country, otherwise less desirable social changes might be thrust upon it.

This meant that changes in the Malay mindset were necessary to adapt better to a rapidly urbanising society. The Far Eastern Economic Review found that a less declared aim of the "Look East" policy was to ensure that the Malay community was better prepared to handle industrialisation.

Dr Mahathir also began to push

cial entertainment in which Western values predominate, their corrosive influence was felt to permeate Malaysian society. This was not a uniquely Malaysian observation – a more developed, cosmopolitan and largely non-Muslim Singapore next door felt the same.

And thus the concept of "Asian values" was born, and championed – soon proving to be yet another misunderstood idea. Instead of seeing it as the latest incarnation of Look East, foreign pundits echoed local critics to dismiss it in the narrow context of a recipe for authoritarianism.

These critics failed to realise that

When the NEP ran its course in 1990, it had fallen short of a stated goal – 30% of an expanded economic cake in bumiputra hands – although the gap between bumiputras and other Malaysians had nonetheless narrowed. Malaysia had also matured somewhat, so a different angle on the NEP's "growth with equity" had to be adopted in national economic planning.

In place of the NEP came the OPP (Outline Perspective Plan), a watered-down form of affirmative action with a focus on future growth and productivity. Not only would the ethnic divisiveness initially occasioned by the NEP be avoided, the prospects of national unity would be enhanced.

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir also strove to raise Malaysia's profile abroad in various international fora. This happened while

try.

Australian journalist and author Ian Stewart is a Malaysia watcher who concedes that Dr Mahathir is no dictator, but wonders “why he ever thought he could change the Malay.”

In sociological terms, societies and communities are organic and amenable to change, contrasted with the racist colonial view of “the natives” as static and mindless objects. The motive forces for change may vary from time to time and from place to place, and change may be for good or ill, but change itself is inherent in life and all living beings.

Those more familiar with Malaysia and Mahathir also know that if anyone can “change the Malay,” it is Dr Mahathir. Starting political life as a Malay nationalist, his policy pragmatism drove him to embrace the concept of a single Malaysian race (Bangsa Malaysia), Asian values and the progressive liberalism contained in Vision 2020.

He has for 22 years been prime minister of the country, head of government, Chairman of Barisan Nasional, and President of Umno. Regardless of the claims of opposi-

change, he wanted to expedite it.

And he wanted to do this in more ways than anyone else before. Given his background and beliefs, Malaysians would be more surprised if he did not want to change the Malays and believe that he could.

Soon upon ascending to the premiership in 1981, Dr Mahathir instituted the “Look East” policy. Officially, this was intended to import the industrious work ethic of Japan and South Korea while diversifying Malaysia’s dependence away from its traditional Western partners and values.

This happened at a time when Malaysia was on the threshold of accelerated industrialisation. Among the social changes underway was a pronounced rural-urban drift, where the younger generation in the rural areas was moving to the towns to take jobs in factories set up by foreign investors.

Rice fields and orchards were being left behind for assembly lines that offered better remuneration. Owing to demographics, this largely involved the Malay community.

More than before, the occupational progress of Malays hinged on

“The Prime Minister has personally given birth to many unique ideas which eventually led to projects like the KL International Airport, the Petronas Twin Towers, the Penang Bridge and the North South Expressway. The last 20 years of his leadership have seen the greatest paradigm shift for the Indian community. He’s helped us in many ways and has always listened to the problems faced by the community. Whenever I bring up these problems in the Cabinet, he would immediately act on them. He is the Great Warrior because in Sanskrit, Maha means Great and Thir means Warrior.”
– **Works Minister and MIC President Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu**

the Malays into habits of greater diligence, initiative and regularity, in the hope that they could cope better with the demands of international markets. Agricultural lifestyles determined by the seasons had to give way, rapidly, to the punch clock of assembly plants, which he introduced even in government offices.

The phase of rapid industrialisation swept through the 1980s, enduring a rough patch when the economy slowed in the second half of the decade. Nonetheless, growth figures had been positive enough to show what Malaysian enterprise could do.

But as the Malaysian economy opened further to the world, a world of commerce and commer-

if indeed the leaders of the “Singapore school” – Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir (the latter had studied and graduated in Singapore) – had been authoritarian in their long careers without the aid of a justifying concept, they surely did not need one towards the end of their careers.

Policywise, Dr Mahathir had inherited the second half of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This 1970-90 programme sought to restructure Malaysian society and promote national unity by distancing occupational type from racial identity, and giving the largely disadvantaged Malays (bumiputras) preferential treatment in such areas as higher education and employment.

Malaysia’s GDP per capita grew until it was no longer considered a poor country (in excess of US\$8,000), and Malaysia became the world’s 17th largest trading nation.

This made the country the most developed “developing country” and Muslim nation in the world, while an expanding economic cake also ensured racial harmony on the ground. Malaysia became a model for other developing countries, instilling pride in all Malaysians.

The economic achievements particularly gave the Malay community a lift, and the sense of national prowess came to be captured in the can-do slogan “Malaysia Boleh.” But this was not enough to stave off consumerist complacency or rumbling political discontent, particularly among the Malays.

Malaysians had developed such materialistic lifestyle habits as conspicuous consumption, or at least the longing for it, while cultural precepts seemed to be in abeyance. To check corrupting influences like self-indulgence and hedonism, what began earlier as “Islamic values” had morphed into “universal

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values," and then into "Asian values."

By the close of the century, the younger generation of Malays seemed to have taken their status as NEP beneficiaries for granted. Even students on government scholarships took time off to demonstrate against the Government as never before, neglecting their studies.

Dr Mahathir saw this as ingratitude, even as the dependence of young Malays on government assistance remained or grew more ingrained. Meanwhile the onset of

A Malay leader for all time

competitive globalisation meant that this dependence would work against the future prospects of Malays themselves.

Mahathir's response was to introduce a degree of meritocracy into higher education, rewarding the more deserving and discouraging Malays from taking their privileges for granted. It was another typically shrewd recognition of the need of the times.

In essence, Dr Mahathir has kept to the fundamentals of the NEP by raising the performance

profile of Malays in independent economic activity, narrowing the gap between Malays and non-Malays, and thereby promoting national unity.

Yet in announcing his resignation in June 2002, he lamented that he had failed in his most urgent task of "changing the Malay". If he had failed in transforming the collective attitude of the Malay community, he nonetheless succeeded in keeping faith with the NEP despite mounting pressures from globalisation.

The degree of Dr Mahathir's success or failure may continue to be debated indefinitely, but his own admission of failure is itself part of his own high and exacting standards. Things could be better, but despite difficult odds along the way, they could also be much worse.

As he steps down as Prime Minister, it would seem enough that he has succeeded in raising the economic performance and profile of Malays, by boosting their confidence and professional capa-

bilities – and made this a feature of 21st century Malaysia.

For Malaysians in general, he has done more. Beyond the grandiose infrastructure projects and enlarged incomes, he has given the country the self-assuredness to think outside various boxes and strive for world-class performance.

As for whether or by how much he has changed the Malays, he has at least changed the concept of the Malay nationalist by personal example: from one who advances Malay nationalism, to a Malay who advances Malaysian nationalism.

STAR 31 OCT 2003