

The dilemma continues

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I read *The Malay Dilemma* at a young age, when I was in the Third Form. I remember my late father reminding me that the book was still banned by the government, although by that time its author Dr Mahathir Mohamad — who was in the political wilderness after having been sacked from Umno in 1969 by party leadership led by Tunku Abdul Rahman — was back in the Cabinet as a full minister.

The hardcover red colour book, written in 1970, was left behind in my father's possession by a family friend. The book impressed me a lot as it was then one of the most direct open criticisms by a Malay within the Umno circle to the ruling Malay leadership.

Flipping through the pages again, *The Malay Dilemma* is indisputedly a landmark book by the then Umno rebel. It points out the weaknesses of the Malays, their social and political problems and the convenient Malay-Chinese Ali-Baba business set-up. The book also sorts out what should be the meaning of racial equality in a multi-racial Malaysia. Some of the arguments offended not only the Malays but also the non-Malays — thus earning him the "ultra-Malay" tag.

The book's introduction seeks to explain what went wrong with the nation following independence, and culminating in the racial riots of May 1969. It dwells on the weaknesses that plagued the Tunku's government — the

went on around it. Secure of its absolute majority in Parliament, it was contemptuous of criticism. Policies were made which completely ignored public opinion."

On racial intergration, Mahathir has this to say: "Looking back through the years, one of the startling facts which must be admitted is that there never was true racial harmony. There was a lack of inter-racial strife. There was tolerance. There was accommodation. There was a certain amount of give and take. But there was no harmony."

Mahathir's hard-hitting views were very forward looking as he analysed the problems that plagued the Malays and the nation in a way not many Malays or Malaysians would have dared discuss them. But a fair question to ask now upon his retirement is, could he have done more to solve the problems that he mentioned in his book 33 years ago — especially with 22 of those years under his premiership? And more importantly, did Mahathir fail to change the system that dictates Malaysian politics — the one that he criticised Tunku Abdul Rahman and the Alliance government of?

To his credit, much has changed for the better — the economy is more diversified, the infrastructure development matches the world's best and there is a vast reduction in hardcore poverty.

But some of the weaknesses men-

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advent of patronage, the powers that be who believed they could mould and shape the *rakyat* and opinion in any way they pleased and a government that was not led by the most able but by a group of “yes” men.

To quote from the book: “But independent Malaya chose to treat membership of the Cabinet as a reward for loyalty to party chief... The result was the mediocre men were left to run the country... But power corrupts, and the near-absolute power that the Alliance [predecessor to the Barisan Nasional] obtained corrupted the thinking of the leaders almost absolutely.”

Mahathir also went on to highlight the issue of patronage: “The advent of patronage as a factor in intra-party politics was significant, for it meant that the leaders were no longer answerable to the ordinary members and the faceless supporters... The leaders of Umno, the senior partners of the Alliance government, succumbed to this disease and believing that they no longer needed to heed the opinions of their supporters, they disregarded them at every turn.”

He further criticised the Alliance government: “But the government was apparently oblivious to what

tioned in *The Malay Dilemma* are still very much intact. Business and political patronage is one example. Should a few select businessmen, bumiputeras and non-bumiputeras included, continue to get too many projects? Must businessmen be politically connected to stay ahead of their competitors? And when they are in trouble, are all the bailouts justifiable? Have Mahathir’s years in power further entrenched this system instead of dismantling it?

Political and business patronage, which often leads to corruption in the public and private sectors, can be reduced. The open tender should be the basis for awarding projects and political patronage can be further restricted if office terms of political leaders, including ministers, chief ministers and state excos are limited.

And for Malaysia to move on as a dynamic country, we need to be a thinking nation led by a thinking society. Rightly or wrongly, for better or for worse, many considered Malaysia was led single-handedly by Mahathir during his tenure as prime minister.

To his last day as prime minister, he defended his democratic record, main-

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taining that too much freedom could lead to anarchy. But should there have been more tolerance on the part of Mahathir on contrarian views, suggestions and criticisms from the *rakyat*? Why should the *rakyat*’s views be curbed through the Aku Janji syndrome, limited circulation and granting of licence to opposition newspapers and, over the years, what seems to be the gradual erosion of fundamental liberties guaranteed by the Constitution?

Could race relations, which Mahathir described 33 years ago as “no true harmony”, have improved further had racial and religious issues been allowed to be discussed in an open manner rather than being relegated to the “sensitive” basket?

Mahathir may have had his own reasons but for the new leadership, as

the adulation for the elder statesman wears off, must show strong commitment to learn from the mistakes of the past. The new leadership must learn how to listen and take criticism in its stride.

When Donald Moore decided to publish *The Malay Dilemma*, he gave this quote as one of the reasons: “This is an important book because it is written by an educated, progressive Malay and because it deals frankly with the problem of racial harmony in Malaysia... we are publishing it because we believe the author’s views should be read — whether we share them or not.”

Mahathir in his preface has this to add: “The publication of this book is not calculated to endear the writer to any particular section of Malaysians. Indeed, it is most likely to cause dependency among some and severe resentment among most others. No apologies are offered. What I have written is written with sincerity.”

Sans political and business patronage and irrespective of political affiliations and convictions, there are a lot of critical but sincere Malaysians out there too, who want nothing more than to better the nation. ■