

31 OCT 2003

S'pore-Mahathir

S'PORE NEWSPAPERS PAY TRIBUTE TO DR MAHATHIR

SINGAPORE, Oct 31 (Bernama) -- Singapore newspapers today paid tribute to Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who retires today after being at the helm for 22 years.

The Straits Times in its editorial says that Dr Mahathir has seemed such a permanent fixture, "it will be hard to conceive of a neighbourhood without him. Correction -- make that a world stage."

"He is at the peak of his powers and reach, admirers and even some critics would say. Yet today, still an energetic man and irreverent for his 77 years, he ends of his own free will the stewardship of an emerging nation that has been hugely successful, if controversial in spots," says the newspaper.

Singaporeans, among many others, it says, will have to make a mental adjustment.

The editorial notes that Dr Mahathir's retirement, such as it is, is well-earned.

"This newspaper which on occasion had incurred the wrath of his government has little doubt he will not simply fade away in Langkawi to write his memoirs."

But Dr Mahathir, says the newspaper, hands on the baton today to his steady deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, at a difficult time of vortex-like geopolitical swirls.

Political Islam as a global phenomenon has to be confronted, or its malevolence will taint Malaysia, it says.

"Malaysia's economic expansion running parallel with higher-end industrialisation calls for delicate steering, as urban terrorism and currency terrorism by big funds and individuals -- the latter one of Dr Mahathir's least endearing people -- can alter the process overnight," says the Straits Times.

Abdullah, says the newspaper, would want to try the shoes on for a comfy feel. "There is the Mahathir legacy of reformer-moderniser to build on".

The Business Times, in its editorial focuses on the Malaysian premier's disappointment towards the Malays.

"Notwithstanding his many achievements, by his own reckoning, Dr Mahathir Mohamad relinquishes the prime ministership of Malaysia today a disappointed man," it says.

As Dr Mahathir has often said, the Malay community, who make up about 60 per cent of the population, did not live up to his ambitious vision for them, says the newspaper.

Earlier this year, it notes that Dr Mahathir lamented the fact that after 35 years of affirmative action, the Malays were still unable to compete without government aid and other special concessions.

"Nonetheless, within the span of one generation, he left Malaysia with a solid middle class (and perhaps more importantly for social stability, a strong Malay middle class)," says the Business Times.

It also notes that there has been considerable progress in wiping out poverty. From 1982 to 2002, the Malaysian per capita income tripled to reach close to US\$4,000 and the level of absolute poverty declined from 35 per cent to 5 per cent.

And because he was an impatient man, many things got done, says the editorial.

It cites examples of the Penang Bridge which was built in the first years of his term; the North-South Highway was completed, as was a fibre-optic network; Malaysia now has the largest car market in Asean, but a notable failure was the Perwaja steel project, it adds.

But Dr Mahathir, says the newspaper, had good timing.

In the face of the 1986 recession, he threw open the economy to foreign investors.

Japanese companies were turning to South-East Asia in the wake of the Plaza Accord and the rising yen, and Malaysia became a major beneficiary, it says.

Again in 1997, he took the unorthodox route of adopting currency controls and put the country back on the road to recovery, the Business Times says.

Abdullah, it says, will need to build on the many achievements of Dr Mahathir, while avoiding his excesses.

The Today newspaper, an English tabloid with the second largest circulation, gave a front-page coverage of Dr Mahathir headlined: 'An era ends today and Dr M is ready to sail alone.'

After 22 years of political rhetoric and a shock resignation announcement in June last year, Dr Mahathir is finally retiring to "sail round the world alone," it quoted the premier as saying yesterday.

Malaysian newspapers, it notes, are tripping over each other to offer the thickest "Dr M" bumper editions today.

The Star is even producing its own VCD special to thank Dr Mahathir with tributes from his family, Barisan Nasional leaders, CEOs, hometown folk and other citizens, it says.

"Indeed the collective impassioned frenzy for bapak -- or father -- Dr Mahathir seems like a Malaysian equivalent to the kind of affection reserved for South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

"Of course, the 78-year-old Premier is far less retiring than Africa's senior statesman," says the newspaper.

"Even as he prepared to step down, he gave a rosy picture of the economy

-- an achievement for which even his foes have praised him -- and then went on to defend his brand of democracy," says Today.

Dr Mahathir predicted that he leaves the helm with an average 6 per cent gross domestic product (GDP) growth for Malaysia over the next two years, it adds.

Berita Harian dedicated three pages on Dr Mahathir and his successor, Pak Lah, and a front-page report on the Malaysian premier's last advice to the Malays, at a breaking of fast event at the Putra World Trade Centre yesterday.

Local TV station, Channel News Asia has been giving special reports on Dr Mahathir on its prime time news at 9.30 pm for the past few days, and it has also created a special segment dedicated to the premier titled 'Mahathir Mohamad Steps Down' on its web site.

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