

Mahathir as steady as ever

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TWO weeks ago, I went to Singapore to listen to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad give the Ho Rih Hwa Public Lecture at Singapore Management University (or SMU).

I hadn't heard him speak live for well over a year and I wanted to get a sense of how the former Prime Minister of Malaysia was faring. At the same time, I wanted to observe a foreign audience's response to him.

I should explain that as a lawyer and columnist, I have always had mixed feelings about Dr M – a man who has never hid his disapproval of my chosen professions. Over the years, I have alternated between anger, frustration and, at times, admiration.

Contrary to what many people had expected, Dr Mahathir has steered clear of politics. He has been fastidious about his retirement and has refrained from meddling.

Still, for a man who is so used to the limelight, the foreign trips and speaking engagements are a useful way of communicating his ideas without crossing swords with his successor.

Certainly his performance in Singapore's cavernous and ultra-modern Suntec complex, in front of a packed audience of over 2,300 people, revealed that he was as combative – and, strangely, also as charming – as ever. The presentation was "vintage Dr Mahathir".

In fact, in mid-flow, he was like the US military in Iraq: it was all shock and awe. He stunned the crowd and since this was Singapore and they were used to being overwhelmed by strong leaders, they sat back in awe as he laid out his arguments, drawing the distinction between democracy and good governance and questioning us on our unwillingness to challenge ideas and ideologies imported from the West.

For Dr Mahathir, there are no easy answers, no cookie-cutter solutions, to Asia's economic and political problems. He synthesised familiar arguments, combining his views on colonialism with an appeal for the greater intellectual independence and rigourousness.

He challenged us by saying that we're hegemonesed by the West. Why were we so beholden to ideas formulated in the West? He listed them: Marxism, democracy and communism.

Did we have to wait for the west to give birth to these ideas, to implement them, export them and then disprove them? Shouldn't we be creating political ideas and ideologies of our own – based on systems of governance that are more in tune with our socio-political realities?

Are all undemocratic systems of government wrong, he asked? What about the Meiji emperors, Thailand's King Chulalongkorn and South Korea's Park Chung Hee? They transformed their nations. Would they have been able to achieve such remarkable progress had they been democracies?

Dr Mahathir is not for the faint-hearted. I've never seen him "duck" a question and, in Singapore, he stood up and defended his position.

When asked about Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, for example, he remained unwavering. His rejection of his former protege was forthright and uncompromising. One might not agree with his reasons but there was no doubt as to his sincerity and determination.

As he talked about Anwar, I couldn't help but feel we were witnessing the tail end of a contest of wills. It was all about two men, protege and mentor, slugging it out. History will be the judge.

Still, it was a bravura performance. Dr Mahathir leads from the front. He has the intellectual confidence to take on conventional wisdom, dissect the weaknesses that we've overlooked and then force us to reassess our

preconceptions.

Kishore Mahbubani, the author of *Can Asians Think?* and a respected Singaporean diplomat, said: "He's still the most outspoken voice in South-East Asia. He can contribute more by mellowing a little and nuancing his message."

One of the most striking aspects of the talk was the large number of young people in the audience and their obvious fascination for Dr Mahathir. Of course, for many of the SMU students, it was like being in the presence of living historical personage, an integral part of South-East Asian political history – a giant alongside Lee Kuan Yew.

And yet, as I listened to their questions, I realised there was a hunger – even among the younger generation – for strong, decisive leadership.

While the contemporary mood was more inclined to consensual leadership – men and women who would listen to the people and dance alongside them in nightclubs – the people also wanted politicians who would "kick ass".

Although Dr Mahathir may infuriate many of us (myself included), he remains a reassuring presence. His strength of personality, his strong convictions are unwavering and inflexible.

And while we should ultimately trust the systems of laws, the checks and balances that we have set in place in Malaysia, there is a deep yearning for the strong leader to guard the entire structure – a man around whom we can build our lives.

Strong leaders with fixed ideas are like beacons – incredibly bright beacons – on a murky political landscape. They provide a constant and continuous source of illumination when all else fails.

We may not agree with what they have to say (some of the time their views enrage) but at least we can depend on them.



Writer's Journal

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