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Book by diplomat on Dr Mahathir stands out

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Of the numerous books in the market paying tribute to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, one stood out for two reasons.

Mahathir - The Secret of the Malaysian Success (picture) was the top-selling book at MPH Bookstores, the country's largest book chain, in the week following Dr Mahathir's retirement after 22 years in power.

More interestingly, the author - Hajrudin Somun - was the sole non-Malaysian who made it to MPH's top 10 list in that genre for the week ending Nov 2.

Somun is Bosnia-Herzegovina's ambassador to Malaysia, a country which looked up to Malaysia, and specifically, Dr Mahathir in charting its progress after the war-ravaged years.

A journalist-turned diplomat, he wrote the 275-page bestseller with the greatest of admiration for the former Prime Minister. Somun's style was frank and simple but his work was remarkably well-researched given the year or so he had stayed in Malaysia as head of his country's mission.

The book is divided into six chapters, starting with an account of the events on June 22 last year when Dr Mahathir announced his resignation at the Putra World Trade Centre at the end of the Umno general assembly.

The following chapters trace Dr Mahathir's political career, his achievements - and failures - from the 1960s to the 1990s before a wrap-up containing the author's views of the post-Mahathir era.

Sure enough, a large portion of the book is an autobiographical account of Dr Mahathir. But unlike other similar publications in the market, this book is seen from the viewpoint of a foreigner, and a Muslim at that.

For example, Somun paid tribute to Dr Mahathir's unorthodox currency controls measures that, to a large extent, kept currency speculators like George Soros at bay during the Asian financial crisis in 1997.

Soros is popular in many Eastern European countries, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, which have benefited tremendously under the Open Society linked to him.

On the Look East Policy propagated by Dr Mahathir in the 1980s, Somun wrote: "For me, a European, brought up in an anti-fascist and thus anti-Japanese spirit, it was a special revelation."

Somun was referring to how much Dr Mahathir wanted Malaysians to learn from the Japanese work ethics despite Japan's aggression against East Asian countries during World War II.

Mahathirism - a term referring to Dr Mahathir's thoughts - was given a fresh perspective by Somun who discussed in detail the former Prime Minister's economic, political and social policies in plain, layman language.

From Chapter Four, Somun gave an insightful overview of Dr Mahathir's career since he took over as Prime Minister in 1981. Within two weeks, he had ordered the release of 21 Internal Security Act detainees.

And for the next 22 years, Dr Mahathir's policies in turning Malaysia from an agrarian economy to an industry-led, respectable country was clearly-described by Somun.

A substantial portion in the penultimate chapter in the book was devoted to the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. As a diplomat, Somun was careful when narrating the series of events during those tumultuous months, resorting more to factual accounts than

giving his opinions.