

01/11/2003

Dr Mahathir, the taboo breaker

John Teo

TODAY will be just another day - except we have a new occupant at Seri Perdana.

After having the same person occupying that hallowed residence for more than two decades, ushering in a new tenant is the stuff of revolutions in any other country.

That it happened in such an almost anti-climactic fashion here may well turn out to be Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's most enduring legacy to the nation.

My first impressions of Dr Mahathir as our leader were formed while studying abroad.

Boring Malaysia never makes it into the front-pages of foreign newspapers, much less foreign television screens.

And here I was, one wintry day in Canada, hearing Canadian officials protesting Malaysia's treatment of Vietnamese boat-people and commentators debating whether Dr Mahathir actually said he would shoot or "shoo" away unwanted people sweeping onto our shores with each wave.

On the way up to the premiership then, Dr Mahathir obviously had the image as a Malay "ultra" to live down.

The greatest irony perhaps is that he left office with perhaps Malaysian Chinese feeling the most sorry that he is no more our leader.

Sweet vindication indeed, but the fact Malaysians as a whole regard Dr Mahathir's departure with varying degrees of fondness speaks of his unfinished business - the seemingly endless struggle to view the nation's collective problems, its future challenges and, yes, its leaders, through one single prism, the Malaysian prism.

There is something quintessentially Mahathirite for Dr Mahathir to have ended his time in office by provoking an international debate over the issue of race in human affairs.

It seems like a most natural progression for someone whose political career took off following a book he authored centring on the theme of the political and economic interaction of the races in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir was then typically taking his physician's diagnostic approach to the Malaysian condition as he saw it and offering his own prescriptions for the condition. Malaysia's complicated racial mix is accepted by every Malaysian as given and commenting on it is the most natural thing for most Malaysians to do. We will be truly bewildered if we were to be labelled "racist" simply for commenting on the country's racial composition.

The "paradox" that many foreigners see in Malaysia is the fact that we accept "race" as a legitimate public issue so openly rather than pretend it is a non-issue and instead of seeing a country wrecked by communal violence as a consequence, ours is an exemplar of harmonious and progressive living.

It is therefore within the context of either a foreign lack of appreciation of what Malaysia is all about or a deliberate (and somewhat arrogant) rejection of what we are in spite of our proven success that we must view, with a certain equanimity, the foreign criticism that Dr Mahathir's comments about Jews may incite hatred by others. "Race", for better or worse, is taboo in polite Western discourse.

However, the West, despite its preponderance of power and resources, has proven over so many decades unable to solve the Israel-Palestine dispute

in what is objectively a very insignificant piece of global real estate. The problem has been allowed to fester until it now threatens to engulf the entire world in a maddening spiral of international terrorism.

The Middle East dispute has become one in which all of us now have a stake because international terrorism impinges on us all. To break the logjam, if international taboos need to be violated, so be it.

Dr Mahathir, if he had his way, would, I am sure, rather be spending his retirement pursuing his pastimes of sailing and writing and doting on his grandchildren. But, as Pakistani President Pervez Musharaf perhaps presciently said recently, Dr Mahathir "cannot" retire.

Dr Mahathir cannot run to be President of the United States either, and I very much doubt that he would take the job of secretary-general of the United Nations even if offered. But having broken the international taboo about race, we can reasonably count on him finding some appropriate forum or position from which to at least influence international events along the lines of his own deeply-held prescriptions and convictions.

The world, not least the Western world, will want to wish him well if such post-retirement burdens are thrust upon Dr Mahathir.