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Fare thee well

COME NOV 1, A WHOLE GENERATION of young Malaysians will wake up to a new day of immense significance in their lives. It would be their first experience ever that someone other than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be their Prime Minister. For 22 years they grew up under his leadership of the nation, seeing him steering it through trials and tribulations and achieving several triumphs even in the face of adversities.

For other Malaysians, the day after Oct 31 which officially marks Mahathir's retirement from the nation's top post, is equally as wrenching. They may have seen other Prime Ministers come and go before Mahathir, but it would not lessen the sense of loss, particularly of one who has wielded such a great influence over their life and brought them many far-reaching changes through his policies that have shaped the country into what it is today.

The nation's previous Prime Ministers all had legal qualifications but Mahathir, the fourth after Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn, broke the mould, being a medical doctor more at home diagnosing diseases than dishing out doctrine. But his assumption of the country's premiership could be said to be exactly what, well, the doctor ordered.

Having towered over Malaysian politics over two decades, he has left an indelible mark on the political, economic and financial landscapes; at times through sheer dint of combative abrasiveness against detractors and dogged determination against the doubters. It was the West that has borne the brunt of his oft-acerbic tongue, with many quite unable to stomach the indignity of having a Third World leader pointing out unpalatable truths to them and asserting an independence of mind as well as an intellectual capacity to fly in the face of supposedly superior Western orthodoxy.

His legacy is legion - the national car project Proton, infrastructure projects like the North-South Highway, the Penang Bridge, the Petronas Twin Towers and the Multimedia Super Corridor are just some of the physical landmarks. There is a world-class mind at work as well. Who would have thought Vision 2020 could be plucked out from the realm of improbabilities and turned into an assertive plan of action to bring developed nation status to Malaysia by the second decade of the third millennium? The Look East Policy proved the point that the West did not harbour the best in technology nor industry.

Perhaps the greatest eye-opener to the world were the events following the Asian financial crisis. Defying standard economic conventions, he adopted a contrarian approach to get Malaysia back on its feet, among the measures rejecting recourse to the IMF and pegging the ringgit, all of which, with hindsight, proved to be the proper course of action. His venom he reserved for currency speculators who profited at the expense of bankrupting nations.

For anyone wishing to scratch the patina of his persona and understand where he is coming from, perhaps it is time they read his controversial book *The Malay Dilemma*. Mahathir had written that the Malays were riven with apathy, accepting their fate as second-class citizens in their own country. He blamed the stupor and malaise on the marginalisation brought about by colonial rule. Many who follow his thinking in the book can well understand his consistent attacks on Western neo-colonialists who he sees as unable to accept that an Asian model of development should apply this side of the Bosphorous.

As the nation's premier civil servant, it would be interesting to see how his years of service, stepping down at the age of 77, will stand in

Malaysian history. However, no amount of gratuity, neither half-salary pension nor accolades will be enough recompense for his sacrifices and his contributions to the nation. Happy retirement Dr Mahathir.

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