

31/10/2003

Milestone in Malaysian history

THE last day of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's 22-year term as Prime Minister marks the end of a remarkable epoch. He will go down in history as a great leader and go up in the eyes of his people as the greatest Malaysian alive.

No one can dispute his central accomplishment in transforming Malaysia from an agricultural backwater into a rapidly industrialising economy and manufacturing powerhouse. Even his critics and political enemies concede his achievements. Under his astute policies and management, the country experienced unprecedented development and economic progress. Despite some inevitable setbacks, the rate of economic growth in Malaysia has been one of the highest in the world.

His reputation as a pragmatic problem-solver and crisis-fixer has stood the test of time. By going against the grain of economic orthodoxy in pegging the exchange rate and imposing capital controls, he single-handedly steered the country away from the worst ravages of the 1997 financial crisis and masterminded the economic recovery that followed.

Despite attempts to depict him as an authoritarian leader who rides roughshod over human rights - and lately as a Jew-hating Islamic fundamentalist - Dr Mahathir's vision of the future of Malaysia has always been firmly based on a belief that the different ethnic communities could prosper together in a democracy which protected the cultural, linguistic and religious rights of all of its inhabitants.

The formula of affirmative action to achieve economic parity for the Bumiputera within an overall strategy of rapid growth has been crucial in preventing racial strife and laying the foundation for national integration. He will perhaps be remembered most fondly for enhancing racial harmony.

Dr Mahathir's legacy will continue to empower present and future generations of Malaysians. He inspired many projects ranging from the Proton national car to the Petronas Twin Towers and the Multimedia Super Corridor, which continue to produce far-reaching consequences for national development. Underlying these is a moral dimension: he has made Malaysia into an Islamic nation that is progressive, tolerant and pluralistic.

In the process, he has injected a sense of national pride and confidence, which has inspired Malaysians to circumnavigate the globe, swim across channels, climb Mount Everest, become astronauts, and dare to think and do things once thought to be beyond them.

It is a testament to the universality of his thought and the range of his interests that Dr Mahathir has not limited himself to narrow, nationalistic concerns. His blunt and passionate criticism of imperialism and globalisation, his advocacy of the creation of an international order on the basis of justice and equality, and his defence of Islam against the war on terror, has put Malaysia on the world map and made him a prominent spokesman for the developing countries.

It falls to present and future generations of Malaysians to work not only towards the realisation of his vision for the nation but also towards a world free from the spectre of neo-colonialism. For the sake of Dr Mahathir and his generation who have fought to maintain the country's independence, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that our children will still be free when they become adults.

While he will be stepping down today as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has

too much mental and physical energy and too much experience and knowledge to be allowed the luxury of complete retirement. Nevertheless, although he can be expected to continue to make invaluable contributions in different ways and in different capacities, he will be greatly missed as Prime Minister. Malaysians will always be grateful to him for handing over to his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi a nation that is worthy, stable, peaceful and prosperous.