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Misrepresenting Dr M and Malaysia

THE imperious survey of Malaysia by The Economist bears the distinctive imprint of the Orientalist mode of discourse in its catalogue of misrepresentations and reinforcement of stereotypes by which the mainstream media in the West views this country and the rest of the emerging world.

It begins with snapshots captured through gastronomic caricatures of Malays as "rendang-loving" and Chinese as "kway teoh-eating" - and, somewhere in the middle, of Sarawak as mainly "Christian" and Sabah as "fond of rum" - and ends with the lordly injunction that the "greatest service Dr Mahathir could render Malaysia after all these years would be to retire, full stop".

But the writer renders a disservice to his readers with the clumsy attempt to demystify the mystique of a "Tok Guru" by explaining that it means "something like 'Uncle Teacher'". It is unfortunate that the writer did not consult the many respondents at his disposal to avoid this solecism, a typical Western arrogance. But since many of his readers would probably not spot this gaffe, he is likely to get away with it, probably even adulated.

In the West, he would also get away with depicting Dr Mahathir as "something of a pariah" because in the English lexicon it is not as strong a term of insult as it is in the East. But that's what The Economist survey is - superficial and demeaning.

There is not even the "grudging approval" that the writer says critics of the capital and exchange controls later gave Dr Mahathir. He begrudges every achievement and every success of the Prime Minister.

Apparently not happy that Dr Mahathir is no longer the "pariah" of the West that he deserves to be, the writer wants Dr Mahathir to be made an outcast by his own people, as someone who has overstayed his unwelcome presence and should just fade away. One happy option for the writer would be for Dr Mahathir to become the secretary-general of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, not because he is "a good choice", but because "it would get him out of the country". This is an affront. Malaysia's founding Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, was the first head of the OIC and this country's participation remains active. However, we want to keep Dr Mahathir at home.

Doubts were cast on the credentials and abilities of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - "Is he up to the job of guarding Malaysia against the demons of religious extremism, racial hatred and a fragile and volatile global economy?" He is better educated and positioned, with proven ability, than his British equivalent John Prescott.

There is no doubt that the author of the survey was up to the job of demonising Malaysia and sermonising Abdullah "to dispense" with the "authoritarianism" of Dr Mahathir and admonishing him "not to move into" the prime minister's "palace" in Putrajaya. What presumption!

The writer is also up to the job of castigating the Malaysian Press as "the most supine in non-communist Asia". There is nothing new in this depiction. The stark contrast between the freedom of the Press in the West and the purported lack of it in countries like Malaysia has been trumpeted long and often enough for it to become a self-serving truism among Western media practitioners. But the reality, apart from the propaganda of the Opposition that the foreign media has so glibly become a patsy to, is just

as starkly different.

The Economist is merely being blinkedly opinionated, blathering about the lack of democracy and freedom of expression in Malaysia while advocating the waging of war on Iraq. Facile opinions are not proscribed in this country, and faraway magazines such as The Economist are free to display the bigotry of dismissing the Malaysian Press as doing "pretty much what it is told" as they dance to the tune of Pax Americana.