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The real Dr M stands up

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BECAUSE of its sheer impact on the political landscape, it has often been impossible to assess the premiership of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad with any critical distance or reasoned objectivity.

For a long time published literature about the Prime Minister has been divided uncompromisingly into two opposing sets of opinion:

The most enthusiastic admirers have sought blindly to deify him as a lone champion besieged by the armies of the dark. The most virulent critics, on the other hand, have revelled in demonising him, magnifying each mere trifle into an apocalyptic crisis.

In over 50 years of public life, Dr Mahathir has attracted heated debate on account of his swift and decisive judgment, the ruthless novelty of many of his ideas and the controversy of his actions - winning him legions of supporters, but making him some bitter enemies.

This division coincides with political difference, and it is easy for an observer to dismiss the literary products of both sides as imperfect essays - the inspired but shrill works of a fledgling political society still unsure of its own intellectual maturity.

Now, on the threshold of Dr Mahathir's retirement, tributes pour in: Exhibitions are held in his honour, television stations produce documentaries about his life, friends and foes alike describe publicly the sadness they feel at his departure from a scene he has dominated for more than two decades.

And bookshops are no exception. Each stocks collections of his speeches, large attractive coffee-table pictorial biographies, books he has written, and books written about him.

Into this last class comes new, scholarly assessments of his premiership; each seeking to place Dr Mahathir's battles and hard-won victories in the broader context of the country's history.

"Whatever these books might be," said an assistant at one of the larger Kuala Lumpur retailers last week, "they're flying off the shelves. It's hard to say which is the most popular."

Foremost among them is Khoo Boo Teik's *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents*. The title's impish double entendre belies the rigorous analytical approach that Khoo has brought to bear on the country's recent politico-economic history.

Setting out to examine - and not explicitly to judge - Dr Mahathir's programme for socio-economic development, Khoo grapples with a series of very difficult questions aimed at establishing a sketch of what the post-Mahathir era might look like. The result is a sympathetic, but closely argued, portrait of a man as well as his mission and its consequences.

Besides seeking to understand the course of events that led to Dr Mahathir's unexpected decision to retire, *Beyond Mahathir* functions as an elegant and readable guide to recent developments critical to Malaysian policy-making - events like the political aftermath of the Reformasi movement as well as the Sept 11 tragedy - which long-term impact is still fundamentally incalculable.

Of a more technical cast is Jomo K. Sundram's *M Way: Mahathir's Economic Legacy*, which assembles many of the author's published articles on local economics (dating from the 1980s) that deal with industrialisation, privatisation and the political crisis precipitated by capital market instability during the late 1990s.

While many of M Way's conclusions are critical of Dr Mahathir's domestic policies, Jomo is supportive of his efforts to end the country's colonial dependence on cash crops and to place it firmly on the regional map as an emerging new-economy powerhouse.

Grudging admiration is often the best, for it is given freely only after long consideration, and in his introduction, Jomo himself describes M Way as providing a "back-handed tribute" to a Prime Minister whose policy initiatives, he readily admits, have been sincere.

While many of Jomo's essays might today be considered dated or - at worst - slightly irrelevant, M Way provides an indispensable snapshot of Dr Mahathir's dynamic economic doctrine and its undeniable strengths.

By contrast, In-Won Hwang's *Personalised Politics: The Malaysian State Under Mahathir* assesses the changing nature of Malaysian political power from the perspective of the realist school.

Hwang, a senior research fellow at Sogang University in South Korea, brings a fresh analysis of how Dr Mahathir's unique brand of personal leadership has shaken the very foundations of political engagement in this country.

Beginning with the Alliance party's post-independence electoral victory, Hwang charts the genesis of a system of government that has become increasingly dependent on the judgment and decisions of one man.

While he uses terms such as "authoritarian" in describing this change, Hwang rarely falls into the trap of offering morally-charged judgments of Dr Mahathir's politics, preferring instead to approach his subject from the point of academic neutrality.

Hwang might, for example, describe the decline of state institutions in favour of personal political dominance, but he also describes with equal detail the increased financial and cultural progress that has resulted directly from Dr Mahathir's liberal policies.

A similarly titled, but slightly older, book, *Malaysian Politics Under Mahathir*, by R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy (published in 1999), seeks also to chart a path between those who praise Dr Mahathir for his economic foresight and strong cultural understanding, and those critical of his forceful approach to politics.

While much of the book is devoted to the post-1997 political crisis, readers might find a Western academic assessment refreshing (both authors are professors at the University of British Columbia).

What is least convincing about this book, however, is the authors' habit of including throwaway remarks that have little bearing on points they have already made; remarks such as:

"It is quite in keeping with Mahathir's character that on special occasions, or for charities, he can be persuaded to sing his favourite song *I Did It My Way*. In view of his defensiveness about some miscalculations, he should follow it with an encore, a song immortalised by Edith Piaf, *Je ne regrette rien*." (I regret nothing.)

Perhaps one of the most valuable legacies of Dr Mahathir's leadership is a generation of Malaysians who will be able to read these books dispassionately and appreciate his stewardship of the country through one of the most difficult periods of its history.

And the fact that these books are being "devoured" indicates that perhaps Malaysians are reaching a new level of political maturity, as Khoo has remarked in *Beyond Mahathir*:

"A politician's legacy is not set the day he or she leaves office; its effects cannot be suddenly arrested and neatly packaged. It may not be known for some time how these effects will work themselves through society. A serious interpretation of a political legacy and its consequences, moreover, cannot presume a settled and unproblematic past.

"The interpretation must consider a present that is very much in the making, as well as a future that none can accurately predict."

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