

The days ahead— Mahathir ^{(P) People} speaks his mind

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IN political style and temperament Datuk Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad could not be more different. Will this difference express itself in a change of policy as Datuk Hussein departs and Dr Mahathir becomes Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister? Dr Mahathir says not. "There may be a change of style, but not in the essence of domestic and foreign policy."

True to form, Dr Mahathir indicates in an exclusive interview with the *New Straits Times* that he is going to be a hard task-master — starting with the Ministers in his Cabinet. He says: "I will be getting the Ministers to be involved in the implementation of policy. At present they are only involved in the formulation of policy guidelines, without being responsible for carrying those policies out."

However, whatever his style and inclination, Dr. Mahathir's main priority must be political consolidation:

- OF his own party, Umno, after the rigours of electoral battle last month;
- OF the Barisan Nasional, especially with the running battle between Gerakan and the MCA; and
- WITHIN and throughout the country in the run-in period to a general election which may very well take place in April next year.

The last, political consolidation in the country, may prove to be the most difficult to achieve. His reputation as a Malay "ultra" (among many non-Malays) continues to hound him.

Dr Mahathir has had over six years of solid ministerial achievement, four of which as Deputy Prime Minister as well. He has proved himself an extremely able administrator. He has been scrupulously fair within the context of national policy, pursuing no racial vendetta.

Yet memories remain strong of five Mahathir years in Parliament of vocal representation of Malay grievances, of a controversial book still banned in this country and of expulsion from Umno in September 1969.

Although many of the policies Dr Mahathir advocated have become national policies, the political drama of his "renegade" years continues to be highlighted as if to, today, indirectly attack those policies.

While the new Prime Minister can be expected to try to soothe non-Malay sensitivities, he is not a person who will do so at the expense of his own. This chemistry will be one of the most interesting, even crucial, aspects of Dr Mahathir's early months as Prime Minister.

Frankness

When I interviewed him for *Malaysian Business* in October last year, Dr Mahathir denied — and it is significant that he does deny — that he was an "ultra", an "extremist."

He said: "I believe I have moderate views... I will admit to forthrightness and frankness but I will not admit to being extreme."

"All I was asking for was fair treatment for the Malays, for the national interest...I was asking for the have-nots to be given a chance."

"I do not believe that bumiputras should take over everything for themselves — in that way there will be no fairness. I have been consistent in asking for fair treatment — for all."

But he does believe, though, that the country must give more than an opportunity to the bumiputra. "We have to bend over backwards so that in the rebound you get the median line. You have to be extreme a little, but not completely until you break."

On the other hand, while he is not above trying to establish goodwill, Dr. Mahathir is not the sort of man to tolerate any attempt to attack his past so as to get at present policies.

The NEP, Dr. Mahathir emphasises in this interview with the NST, is not only for bumiputras.

"(The) NEP is designed to stimulate growth... and growth is shared by everybody. The bumiputra share of that growth is only 30 per cent...of course we have to take steps to achieve that 30 per cent, but the others will have benefit from growth. If we stifle growth in this country, the bumiputras will get no share at all; of course, the others will get no share either."

"It is not the bumiputra alone who is involved; everybody is involved, and although it may seem that they (bumiputras and non-bumiputras) are doing it all themselves, it is the Government that makes it all possible. If the Government does not provide economic and political stability, a system of justice which is equitable...the framework wouldn't be there."

The government under Dr Mahathir's leadership will continue to provide that framework without discrimination. The new Prime Minister should not be allowed to reach the point where he asks himself: Why is it that what I have done, and promise to do in power, is given less credence than what I may have uttered in the wilderness?