

Mahathir and the new Malay dilemma

Who most frustrated the late French president Charles de Gaulle? The French people. Who most frustrated Mao Zedong? The Chinese people. It is perhaps the natural lot of single-minded, visionary nationalists that their peoples do not live up to the goals set for them. Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad has neither all the faults nor (as yet) all the strengths of either de Gaulle or Mao. But there is a common thread: Mahathir wants to make his people a force to be reckoned with; to reach that goal, however, requires that the people themselves undergo radical changes in outlook and attitude.

The people are with him in willing the end he desires, and mostly believe the correctness of the path towards it. But are they really prepared to undertake the journey? To say goodbye to friendly faces and accustomed ways to take the hard, uncertain road to fame and fortune? A dozen years after Mahathir shocked Malaysians — Malays as much as non-Malays — with his blunt political testament *The Malay Dilemma*, the nature of the dilemma may have changed, but his underlying analysis remains largely valid.

Then, the dilemma, as summed up by Mahathir, was this: "If no impediment at all is placed in the way of Chinese domination of the economy of Malaysia, the country would certainly be prosperous. The Malay dilemma is whether they should stop trying to help themselves in order that they should be proud to be the poor citizens of a prosperous country or whether they should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if it blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little."

He also described the dilemma as between the Malays' "desire to assert their rights and arrogate to themselves what they consider to be theirs, and the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others."

Partly as a result of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of large-scale, government-led action to raise dramatically the status of Malays (the NEP was being drafted at about the time Mahathir was writing his book), the dilemma now looks different to many Malays. Progress since 1970 in increasing Malay wealth, absolutely and relatively, massively raising educational standards and creating very rapid Malay urbanisation has exceeded what even radical voices such as Mahathir's would then have thought could be achieved in such a short time. The Malays have unequivocally started to resolve the 1970 dilemma by arrogating to themselves a large slice of the cake.

But the dilemma now may be how far they are prepared to ditch accumulated historical and attitudinal baggage in order to ensure that the modernisation of society becomes self-sustaining (or, alternatively, without reacting Iran-style against

the pace of change). The end of the 20-year NEP is now only eight years away. If current progress is maintained, most of the numerical goals — employment, ownership, educational levels — will be, roughly speaking, achieved by 1990. But how equal will the races really be by then in their role in the modern, industrial urban economy and society? Meanwhile, Malaysia may find itself facing much less favourable economic circumstances than it has known for the past decade.

Mahathir is keenly aware that the pace of change for Malays must be sustained. Shape up! Be disciplined! Work hard! Follow new leads! Create a New Malay Man! Some of the rhetoric has been heard before, of course, even from former premier Tun Hussein Onn. But Mahathir has a remarkable record for telling people — most particularly Malays — what they do not want to hear.

The Malay Dilemma, he accurately predicted, would cause "despondency among



some and severe resentment among most others." If non-Malays found his book worryingly extreme in its nationalism, many Malays found it insulting, with its open discussion of some of the alleged negative characteristics of Malay society, and his attribution of them to hereditary as well as environmental factors.

Malays were a race which was lagging behind and must be given (because of their rights in their own land) the opportunity to catch up with the more recent immigrant races. Mahathir would now almost certainly be more optimistic than then about the chances for achieving rapid change — at least in the hereditary factors. (Of all his theories, the heredity argument was most suspect.)

Those out of power must be professional pessimists, while those in it must at least try to be optimistic. The Malay achievement of the past decade must also have lifted some of Mahathir's own despondency about the time needed to correct the

imbalance. While conservatives believed that Malays were equal, but different, Mahathir the radical argued that Malays were unequal and must be force-marched to equality.

The weapon was the political power that Malays had had since independence. But Mahathir could see this had its dangers. "Merdeka brought power and wealth to the new Malay élite . . . Politics was found to be the panacea. It provided the short-cut to everything . . . created for the Malays a soft environment which removed all challenge to their survival and progress. Political power might ultimately prove their complete downfall."

Take up this same thread of argument after a dozen years of the NEP and what does it say? That some of the conditions — education, urbanisation — for the sustained advance of Malays have been created. But insofar as a reasonable livelihood for many more Malays has been provided as a result of political power redistributing the rapidly growing national wealth, rather than by fundamental change in the goals, attitudes and aptitudes of Malays, it may be dangerous — just an expansion of the élite and rentier class, of which Mahathir was so scornful.

Kemal Ataturk may currently not be much in vogue in the Muslim world. And modern, democratic, multi-racial Malaysia is hardly the Turkey of 60 years ago. But Mahathir's rejection of the sentimental links with the British and the almost ritual admiration of things South Korean and Japanese have echoes of Ataturk's campaigns against the veil and Arabic script, and his substitution of the cloth cap (symbol of industrial Britain) for the turban.

Ataturk built on a revival of Turkish national confidence, induced by a defeat of Greece, after decades of Ottoman retreats. Mahathir is set to build on a great revival of Malay self-confidence after years of retreat before British imperialism and immigrant enterprise.

The Malay tide turned in 1947 with the defeat of Britain's Malayan Union proposals — which would have given immigrants equal rights with Malays. Confidence was boosted by independence, then by the economic progress under the NEP. But Mahathir clearly believes that the forging of the new Malay Man able to stand on his feet internationally in the scientific age has only just begun.

Mahathir's antipathy to the British seems to be far more a consequence of his general philosophy than any particular personal prejudice. His campaign has an Ataturk-style symbolism about it. British technology is becoming outdated; Britain's social system shows signs of decay; the British are associated with the past and a particular type of élitist, compromising past in particular.

The very close identification of the old élites with things British has diminished national identity. Politically, too, Britain

bashing — especially over the university fees issue — is good electoral politics among all races.

It does make some Chinese vaguely uneasy about who might be the next object of criticism. And in some quarters it raises concern that some of the better British legacies, such as a sound administrative structure and separation of powers, might suffer with the bad. But generally it goes down well and presents Mahathir as a strong leader taking on an old and arrogant power.

South Korea, of course, is the very model of a modern developing country, which is beating the industrial West and now even challenging the Japanese at their own game. It is also rigorously disciplined, abrasive, single-minded, direct, hard-working, etc. It is most of the things that Mahathir is and would like Malaysia to be.

But for all his bluntness towards others, all his emphasis on self-help and discipline, Mahathir remains remarkably thin-skinned in some ways. His antipathy to the rich, industrial world sometimes sounds more like Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere than the leader of a successful, and fortunate, developing nation. He sometimes gives the impression that he feels the NEP should be applied globally.

Such attitudes are not at all the South Korean style, and have caused some to ask if he will cope well if real adversity confronts the Malaysian economy, or whether he will take to blaming national problems on the unfairness of the world.

The problem — the dilemma — also remains. The Malaysians may want to be as successful in trade and industry as the South Koreans. But do they — the Malays in particular — really want to be and live like the Koreans with their priorities and value systems? Secondly, can they? South Korea and Japan are about the most homogeneous nations in the world — monocultural, monolingual, well defined by geography and history. Malaysia is one of the least homogeneous.

Ultimately, of course, the goals of the NEP are to achieve some modest degree of homogeneity, by pushing the Chinese to adopt Malay linguistic and cultural mores, while the Malays opt for urbanisation, technology and self-discipline. But what is debatable is how many of those in either group who approve of the goals are also determined to follow the path.

There is also an interesting sidelight to the South Korean-Japanese model. It is sometimes said in Malaysia that, in referring to South Korea, Mahathir is really saying "Singapore" and "the Chinese." To some extent, that is probably true. He admires Singapore's discipline and ethnic-Chinese drive. But he has also been critical of the attitudes of the Chinese businessmen.

South Korean and Japanese industrial growth has been based more heavily on social cohesion than on the small-business entrepreneurship at which the Chinese have excelled. Mahathir seems to think that what Malaysians now need are larger-

scale, technology-oriented enterprises to expand the industrial base, rather than trading-oriented businesses. In this case a combination of (Malay-controlled) government money with Malay positive social attitudes (involving coordination, compromise and hierarchy — three very Japanese characteristics) would be at least as valuable as the Chinese attributes — the Malay MBA degree-holder vs the Chinese entrepreneur; the state bureaucracy-big industry nexus of Japan and South Korea vs the Overseas Chinese-style small business-trader-independent professional class.

This is only a random thought, but it is possible that any waning of the Chinese entrepreneurial drive (as immigrant attitudes weaken while any NEP disadvantages depress Chinese morale and as the structure of the economy continues, as it has done since 1970, to move in favour of large state-related enterprises) may lead to Malay economic as well as political pre-

Philip Bowring, Deputy Editor of the REVIEW, gives an outsider's view of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Malaysia's dilemmas.

eminence. That is a dilemma for the Chinese in the future. For the Malays, more immediately, the question is how to respond to the Mahathir prescription.

Mahathir's zeal and the moves to root out inefficiency and corruption have undoubtedly caught the imagination of Malays. Even one of the leading intellectual critics, Syed Hussein Alatas, admits: "I am a bit enthusiastic." He adds: "I believe he is really intent on doing something," about the corruption which Alatas sees as the root of many racial as well as broader social problems.

Even those who resent the intrusions into privacy that a real anti-corruption drive must involve find it hard to quarrel with the intent. And even most of those who find it hard to work up anti-British feelings and have no wish to be like South Koreans accept, intellectually, that this is

the direction in which Malaysia ought to be headed.

But there also seems a strong element of: "Oh God, make me tough, technological, disciplined, etc . . . but not yet."

The same people who admire the aim can almost simultaneously be found to question values which place emphasis on economic and technical achievements to the detriment of cultural and human values — the very courtesy and consideration for the rights of others that Mahathir saw as a weakness. There are doubts too — among the liberal élite — about materialism. "Are we not making an idol of GNP? Are there not better measurements of progress?" Yes, possibly: But they may be more traditionally Malay than contemporary South Korean.

Thus Mahathir faces a problem not only of establishing the ascendancy of a willing spirit over man's naturally weak flesh, but the intellectual commitment to his goals may not be complete.

His directness, aloofness, and single-mindedness are said by many to be not typically Malay — they certainly do not fit his own stereotype of the Malays. For some, it is a welcome style which will get things done. For others, even among the sympathisers, it carries dangers of promoting reaction, so that either the power of his writ will gradually wane or there will be a reaction by the body politic against it — as the Thai establishment reacted against the dedicated, clean, single-minded but narrow and inflexible Tanin Kraivixien.

A related problem, some Mahathir enthusiasts suggest, is that the prime minister has few highly competent advisers who can be placed in key positions in the bureaucracy to keep the momentum of change going. Although he works well with his deputy, Datuk Musa Hitam, the deputy is more of a grass-roots politician of liberal and gregarious instincts and more given to flexibility and compromise than his loner-idealist superior.

Conquering inertia in the bureaucracy is more than a two-month campaign. And rooting out graft from the political system could be beyond anyone's power. The United Malays National Organisation (Umno) is a decentralised, grass-roots or-

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ganisation in a decentralised political environment. Its very democratic constitution makes it hard to control. Mahathir may want to follow in some of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's footsteps. But the People's Action Party and Umno are very different organisms.

A third danger to the Mahathir scheme of things is the obvious one of outright reaction based on religious extremism, which could threaten not only communal harmony but the attitudes needed for a modern industrial economy.

Many believe that the Malay community has weathered the strains of very rapid urbanisation remarkably smoothly so far. Although in recent years there has been a surge of *dakwah* (Muslim missionary) movements, as well as more extremist expressions of religious sentiment, the vogue for highly-visible religiosity may have already peaked. To a large extent such movements were the natural response of people from rural communities who needed the identity, and the security, of the group when they came to the town and to a way of life which was not just different but strongly alien.

Alatas sees a danger that out-of-power politicians may attempt to use the emotional appeal of religious beliefs to come to power, appealing to reactionary, intolerant and exclusivist instincts. However, he sees no conflict between religion itself and urbanisation which might engender a religion-based reaction. There is no need, says Alatas, to fear that religion will decay under the impact of industrialisation, as it did in Europe where church and state have long been separate entities; thus there was no need for a clash in Malaysia. And in Europe, says Alatas, the beginning of the decay of religion preceded the industrialisation.

Others point out that religious radicals have not opposed urbanisation per se, and *dakwah* movements have a high proportion of technically-trained people. Still others are not so sure that religion and modernisation could not seriously conflict if religious radicals ally themselves with conservative political forces anxious to shore up their access to privilege and patronage and perhaps too, one day, with elements of a more politicised and powerful military.

Religion per se is an issue which the ruling coalition must take into account. Even if the majority is no more — and perhaps less — religiously inclined than before, the number of activists has grown, and with it the need for government to occasionally yield to the demands of intolerance.

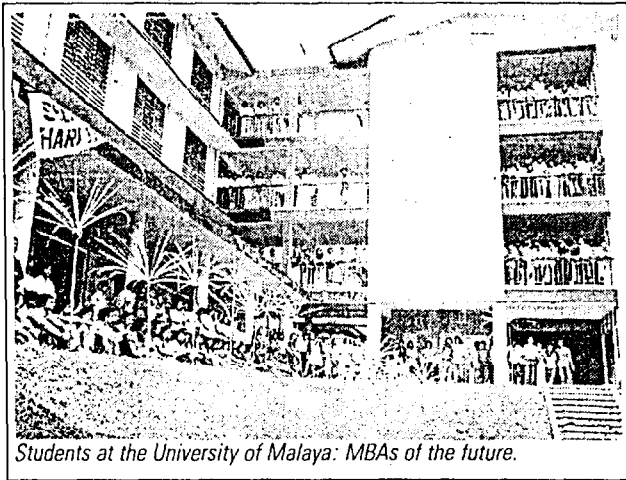
To be Malay is by definition (contrary to the situation in Indonesia) to be Muslim. But the two are not entirely synonymous. Malay culture contains many pre-Islamic customs not in accord with the strictest Islamic interpretations. On this

score, Malays should continue to prove pragmatic and adaptable to the demands of social and economic change while refraining from forcing Islamic precepts down the throats of non-Muslims.

But there are certainly those whose religious principles and interpretations are more powerful than their specifically Malay ones and who regard the modernised Malay, be it the business executive with his Mercedes and his taste for whisky, or the girl factory-worker with her lipstick and a modicum of personal and economic independence, as a threat to religious values.

The zealots consider these "evils" to be inevitable in a society which is both urbanised and permits all kinds of outrageous freedoms to the non-believers for whom gambling, pork, alcohol (and even prostitution) are acceptable. Insofar as religion is an old attitude, any appeal for new thinking may be considered by conservatives as endangering the old indiscriminately.

In time, as the economy develops and the race-economy gap narrows, class will doubtless play a larger role — again perhaps to the detriment of religion — as a



Students at the University of Malaya: MBAs of the future.

rallying point. Industrial workers of whatever race will necessarily begin to see a commonality of interests which surpasses ethnic and religious background. Some claim this is already happening, for example in the electronics factories of Penang. But class will be slow to gel. In urban areas, the races tend to separate naturally into their own communities, even among the middle-class where educational levels might be thought to form a basis for integrated communities.

Among some Malays there is resentment against maldistribution of the fruits of the NEP. Many rural Malays have barely benefited at all — at least in terms of cash income. But to many that is a situation perhaps more readily exploited by Right than Left. Anyway, the Malay Left, for all its antipathy to capitalism and feudalism and its attacks on rich cliques, is still seen by most non-Malays as more Malay than Left.

Indeed, it is, perhaps the basic strength of the Malays that across the political spectrum all believe that the Malays must be the "definitive people" (to use Mahathir's phrase), of Malaysia. And most would probably take the hard (to non-Ma-

lays) line that: "If citizenship is conferred on races other than Malays, it is because the Malays consent to this. That consent is conditional."

Malay instincts for compromise and bargaining should mean that severe problems relating to religious issues, among the Malays or vis-à-vis the non-Malays are avoided. In the past, the strict interpretations of Islam have tended to be most evident in coastal towns where Malays have been open to influxes of Muslims from India and Arabia. Mahathir himself, like many Malay leaders, comes from such a mixed background.

Such intermarriages, according to Mahathir himself, "enriched Malay stock" and as a result of this outside influence town-Malays "found no difficulty in changing with the times." Disciplined, intellectual Islam was a force for progress. In these terms, however, the problem perhaps now is that the up-to-date external influences are not readily available from Muslim societies. In terms of modern skills, urban attitudes and education, Malays are now at least as advanced as any large Muslim ruling community.

Look East! is now the cry, but there are not many Muslims in East Asia. The dilemma is two-fold. The Malays must lose some of their traditional characteristics of tolerance and compromise, and absorb and be more ruthless and business-minded. As Malays, they may be able to do this without risking loss of identity. But can they do it as Muslims as well?

Here the Malay dilemma meets the Chinese dilemma. The Chinese can lose much of their Chineseness, learn Malay and English, forget their own languages, cultural traditions, lion dances, etc., even dilute some of their clan and family-based business enterprise. In other words they can throw out all their traditional and chauvinist baggage but still remain little nearer to joining the Malays as equal partners.

Looking at the situation of the Chinese in the days of the Malacca sultanate, Mahathir wrote: "Even when the Chinese adopted the language, dress and part of the customs of the Malays they were not acceptable because of religious differences. Intermarriage between Malays and Chinese was extremely rare."

It still is. That confronts the Chinese with the dilemma of whether to fight to retain as much as possible of their Chinese traditions or the assumptions that there will always be separate races and that Malaysia's aim must be the harmony of different elements, within the context of Malay as the predominant culture, rather than integration. Or whether to lose part of their identity in the hope of eventual integration.

For the Malays there remains the new dilemma: whether they should make more compromises with religion and tradition, both for the sake of national unity and thus speed their own absorption of the attitudes, ideas and skills of an urbanised, self-reliant, socially- and technically-advanced state. And whether, as they gain economic equality, they will be prepared to see non-Malays acquire more of a share of the political power that alone assures that they are the definitive people. □