

*Mahathir consolidates Malay mainstream politics*

# Mellowed maverick

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

In style, he has matured. In his convictions, he remains unchanged. And to pressmen he still flashes that sardonic smile when asked questions he would rather not answer. But he has learnt to camouflage his barbs better. Ten years in office, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad has grown wiser to the ways of his countrymen, without himself changing those earlier convictions which had stamped him as a rebel in his political youth.

A heart attack and a multiple bypass in January 1989 has barely slowed him down. The man is indefatigable, noted a cabinet colleague. Younger ministers have found themselves dozing off on the election campaign platform, exhausted by his pace, while Mahathir, 65, would be holding forth at the rostrum in the noonday heat. In flight, between campaign stops, while his entourage dozed or chatted, Mahathir would read cabinet briefs, catch up with the newspapers, and edit his speech, recounted his aides of a typical election swing around.

That drive and commitment goes hand in hand with an almost transparent notion that he is the best man for the job. If Mahathir has been criticised for anything, it is his dominant — some call it autocratic — style of leadership.

In the mid-1980s, when Mahathir and his style were the main topic of conversation in the parliament lobby and coffee shop, cabinet colleagues and cab drivers alike combined about his seeming unwillingness to listen to opinions other than his own. Today he is still willing to take people on but less prone to shoot from the hip.

His insistence on promoting the East Asia Economic Grouping, despite resistance even from fellow Asean members, and his readiness to take Australia to task over a series of misunderstandings and perceived slights, are a hallmark of the man. His detractors label it obstinacy; his admirers call it strength of conviction.

The past 10 years have arguably been the most exciting, demanding and nerve-racking for Malaysia in 34 years of independence — in part due to a combination

of events at home and abroad, and in part due to Mahathir's own, characteristic take-the-bull-by-the-horns response to them. Malaysia survived a recession, dented a few institutions, survived a near-split among the politically dominant Malays, saw various people arrested and detained, and now sees itself on the road to becoming a newly industrialised country.

Mahathir swung into office on 16 July 1981, announcing that every civil servant was to clock in and out to ensure efficiency and discourage laggards; they were to wear name tags, to allow the public they served to recognise them and thus promote accountability. He set the standards, coining the slogan "leadership by example."

It was under his premiership that

Malaysia converted to the metric system. Mahathir also adopted a uniform time zone for the country — instead of one for the peninsula and another for Sabah and Sarawak — and made it compulsory for government servants to declare their assets. Everyone was impressed. It looked like the start of the promised "clean, efficient and trustworthy" government that was Mahathir's slogan in the early years of his administration.

The slogans came thick and fast. None of the three previous prime ministers had enjoyed such a high public profile, perhaps because the media then was not as sophisticated. The "Semarak" campaign, a series

of meet-the-people sessions, took Mahathir to towns all over the country to address crowds of thousands bussed in from neighbouring villages.

The media faithfully recorded him planting a tree, helping build a house for a destitute grandmother, helping to haul in a fishing boat in Trengganu state. After a while, the public tired from the overkill.

Keen on innovation and industrialisation, he proceeded to push for the first made-in-Malaysia car, the Proton Saga, in the face of sceptics and cautious feasibility studies. The first Proton Saga rolled off the assembly line in 1985. Today, demand for the Proton Saga is so great that there is a three-to-four-month waiting list for new orders. It has gone through two design changes and, between 1987 and last October, 24,263 cars were exported to 11 countries.

It was with the Proton Saga in mind that Mahathir dropped his next bombshell, suggesting that Malaysia aim for a 70 million population by 2010. His rationale was that if Malaysia was to become an industrialised nation, it would need a large enough domestic consumer base to support its various industries. With protectionism on the rise in developed countries, Mahathir wanted to avoid the risk of over-dependence on foreign markets. But given efforts worldwide to control population growth, Mahathir's startling pronouncement fanned a raging debate.

His other detractors have labelled him an engineer of multimillion-dollar development projects, and blamed him for not spending enough time with the rural poor. Mahathir reacted by taking to task the reporters who trailed him on his rural visits and, instead of writing about his rural programmes, took that opportunity to question him on events in Kuala Lumpur. "Why follow me to the kampong?" he asked once. "And then I am accused of showing no interest in rural development, paying attention only to heavy industries."

Mahathir's uneasiness with the press is legendary. Although generally available for impromptu question-and-answer sessions, Mahathir seems uncomfortable at being button-holed by pressmen and seems to see the press as a necessary evil. On his good days, his replies are blunt; when eva-

sive, he retreats behind condescension.

He is just as scathing of Western-educated lawyers, human-rights activists and environmentalists from abroad who seem blind to the realities of Malaysia.

Lawyers clamouring for constitutional safeguards in defence of parliamentary democracy have been told that the Westminster model is not necessarily the best or only form of democratic government. Human-rights advocates were reminded that Malaysia's multiracial mix and religious sensitivities demanded a different approach, and again, that Western definitions of human rights need not apply in the Malaysian context.

Through it all, and regardless of what they thought of his domestic policies, Malaysians were generally proud of his foreign-policy initiatives.

Even his detractors applauded the way he stood up to the Western powers, appealing particularly to Malaysian youths eager to shed the last sentimental habits of a colonial past. His championing of South-South issues, the interests of small Pacific islands, his offer of technical assistance to some African countries and his wooing of South American investors all gave his foreign policies an innovative stamp.

Whereas his predecessors had followed the traditions of close ties with the former colonial power, Britain, Mahathir swung 180 degrees and pushed for a Look East Policy. In 1981, when the British raised tuition fees for foreign students and refused to make any concessions for the 15,000 Malaysians studying there — the single largest group of foreign students in Britain — Mahathir declared a Buy British Last policy that was to take a few years to be changed.

Today, however, he has come almost full circle. In 1988 Malaysia signed a memorandum of understanding with Britain to purchase US\$1.61 billion worth of defence equipment.

Now it is Australia that claims bottom spot in Mahathir's diplomatic roster. His unhappiness with the Australian Government goes back a few years but the last straw was the airing of the Australian Broadcasting Corp. television series *Embassy*, which contained what was perceived by Kuala Lumpur as disparaging references to Malaysia.

Mahathir lashed back, saying that "as much as they can say nasty things about us and expect us to smile, they should be willing to have nasty things said about them or nasty actions taken against them." Although government officials do not expect this bout with Australia to degenerate to the depths of the row with Britain in the

mid-1980s observers note that Mahathir does not forgive or forget easily.

His domestic policies bear the same nonsense stamp. The friction between the Sabah state government and the Centre, for instance, has escalated during Mahathir's time. Kelantan, which switched from the Parti Islam (Pas) to the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) in 1978, reverted to Pas rule in 1990. More recently, Mahathir's decision to take water out of the states' purview and bring it under federal control, has upset even Johore state, the cradle of Umno.

In his domestic policies, Mahathir favours centralised government. Although it has never been spelt out, he believes that a strong leader at the Centre who knows what is good for the populace is better than overlapping systems of checks and balances, which would only reduce efficiency, noted an Umno colleague.

Nevertheless, Mahathir led the National Front, the ruling coalition dominated by Umno, to victory in three general elections — in 1982, 1986 and 1990 — and retained the Front's two-thirds majority in parliament. "He is a very lucky fellow," noted a

political observer. But good fortune tells only half the story.

Without a doubt, Mahathir is a survivor. Unlike his three predecessors who were all lawyers by training, Mahathir has little time for debate and consensus, preferring swift, remedial action instead. His solution to problems stems from his medical training. To him, problems are like cancer. And a cancerous growth must be cut out. It is better that a patient die because an operation failed, than that he should die because his doctor was too frightened to chance an operation, Mahathir once told newsmen at a dinner gathering.

Brinkmanship is definitely Mahathir's style. In the run-up to the October 1987 arrests, when both Malay and Chinese politicians aired potentially provocative, racial demands and traded veiled threats, Maha-

thir allowed the public exchange to go on for a few weeks before clamping down.

Police arrested 106 people, including opposition MPs, officials of public-interest groups, environmentalists, lawyers, Chinese educationists and church activists in the largest "security" swoop since the anti-communist Emergency ended in 1960. The 106 were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA); some were subsequently released, and others placed under two-year detention orders without trial as provided for by the ISA. Mahathir was home minister and the detention orders carried his signature. With the tension diffused, Mahathir emerged as the man of the hour.

If the mark of a great leader is the ability to turn adversity to good fortune, Mahathir has certainly mastered the art. By the mid-1980s a measure of disillusionment had set in among some of his former fans and allies. His trusted second-in-command, then deputy prime minister Datuk Musa Hitam quit in 1986, citing irreconcilable differences. But if Musa had expected Mahathir to step aside, he was in for a disappointment. Mahathir adroitly turned the tables and emerged stronger from the Musa vote of no confidence.

Nevertheless, the murmurs of dissent within his own Umno ranks swelled so that in 1987 his former finance minister Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah banded with Musa to lead a small posse of party dissidents to challenge Mahathir's leadership of Umno — thereby making a simultaneous bid for the premiership. Razaleigh lost by 43 out of 1,500 votes. Mahathir remained unfazed. "A victory by one vote is still a victory," he declared.

In February 1988, after a protracted court battle over the validity of the 1987 party elections, Umno was dissolved.

The party then split in two, with Mahathir leading the reconstituted Umno Baru and Razaleigh the Semangat '46, or spirit of 1946, which invoked the original spirit of Umno's founding fathers.

In effect, Mahathir had neutralised Razaleigh, since the latter was not allowed to join Mahathir's Umno Baru. For a year, Mahathir criss-crossed the peninsula, wooing the Malay grassroots and consolidating his position. In 1990 he was convincingly returned in the general elections, quashing a Razaleigh-led multiracial opposition coalition.

"You either love him or hate him, but no one is neutral about him," a veteran politician once said of him. That too has passed. Mahathir has graduated from being the issue on everyone's lips. Perhaps because Malaysians have tired of politics,