

The Spokesman

Looking for a telling insight into the political style of Mahathir Mohamad, some analysts like to point to his childhood days. At school, they say knowingly, he was a loner: not given to mixing, always hanging around at the back when team games were being organized. In adulthood, they like to add, his favorite hobbies have included riding and sailing — again, relatively solitary activities. And ones that require keeping an eye on the horizon.

The amateur psychoanalysis may be simplistic, but it certainly sits nicely with the Malaysian prime minister's public profile: the man with a mission, beholden to no one in his determination to defend Malaysia's rights and have its voice heard in international forums. If, to achieve this, he has to say things that others would prefer to leave unsaid, so be it. Says Azman Hashim, the influential executive chairman of the Arab-Malaysian Banking Group: "Dr. Mahathir is prepared to go his own way, often along a path that others don't want to go. That's very brave."

Bravery — or, at the very least, outspokenness — has long been a Mahathir trademark. As a mercurial 43-year-old, he was expelled from the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) after an attack on the government for failing, as he saw it, to provide for the indigenous Malay. He later repeated the charge, with a swipe at the Malays themselves for being overly fatalistic, in his book *The Malay Dilemma*. Written at the time of the traumatic 1969 race riots between Malays and Chinese, the slim volume was promptly banned and remained that way until he became premier and un-banned it in 1981.

As prime minister, Mahathir has vigorously upheld Asian and Malaysian values, decried what he sees as hypocrisy or decadence in the West, and entered chin-first into some famous international rows, particularly with Britain, Australia and the U.S. His calculated snubs have been encapsulated in such slogans as "Look East" and "Buy British Last" (the latter, like many, a temporary phenomenon). At times members of his own government have privately flinched at things he has said, but the consensus is that they needed saying. "The strength of Mahathir is that he's able to confront issues head on," says MP Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, son of a former premier. "And we come out better for it." In effect, Mahathir has taken on the mantle of spokesman for the New Asia, seeking a better balance in the relationship with the West. "We must be able to stand alongside other nations as an equal," he says. "For me that is important."

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For someone with such a pugilistic public stance, Malaysia's fourth prime minister has an almost gentle private mien. He rarely loses his temper, and, when he does, it often seems to be for strategic reasons rather than out of exasperation. Some describe him as autocratic with a tendency to vindictiveness, but Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is not one of them. Says he: "He listens a lot, he reasons a lot. He even changes his position. I don't see how more democratic one can be. But he has to be firm. He is tough, I agree, but we require firm and tough leaders."

Soft-spoken and slow moving — particularly since a quintuple cardiac bypass in 1989 — the 69-year-old former doctor has a treadmill for exercise. He has also been known to stroll in the evening from his office to Merdeka Square. His diary is full most evenings, which means he spends less time with his family than he would like, but his wife, Dr. Siti Hasmah, reports that they are together for some meals and for weekends and holidays. Mahathir's great leisure-time activity is carpentry — another pointer to his loner status — and he is known to have constructed at least one serviceable boat as well as a functioning steam train. He has also been seen venturing into the

kitchen to cook, but because of his heart condition he tries to be careful with his diet.

Born the son of a stern headmaster in the northern state of Kedah in 1925, young Mahathir was a hardworking student, the winner year after year of the English prize and editor of the school magazine. Perhaps significantly, though, he is best remembered for his early skills as an entrepreneur. As a schoolboy, he sold balloons for pocket money and, later, during World War II, started a little business peddling snacks from a hawker's stall. The business thrived — and through his relationship with his fellow-stallholders, Mahathir began a lifelong concern for the lot of the ordinary Malay.

After 14 years of Mahathir's premiership, the Malays, like Malaysia's other ethnic groups, are enjoying the greatest period of prosperity since the days of the Malacca Sultanate. Much of this is due to Mahathir's pragmatic approach. He may scold the West, but he has thrown open the doors to foreign investment. The country is now a center of the global electronics industry. The Malaysian car, the Japanese-designed Proton Saga, has taken over the increasingly packed roads. Thanks to the good times — and the fact that the Malay champion has always been ready to criticize his own people — relations among the races are probably the most relaxed they have ever been. Mahathir is not the man who founded Malaysia, but history may judge him as the leader who truly built it. ■