# Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad: Malaysia's Own World-Class Management Guru

*Like other premiers, Mahathir has been lauded to the skies — and bitterly disparaged. However, his job wasn't a cakewalk. One of his herculean tasks was governing a polyglot, multiethnic, multireligious country that could easily have imploded — like other regions. To his credit, he left a lasting legacy of peace and material security that should not be discounted. Perhaps his noblest achievement was inspiring Malaysians with self-esteem and the ability to stand tall on the global stage.*

Some leaders are content to let the status quo stand, even if their country suffers. A love for status has never been a failing of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. On the contrary, he has instigated changes in countless areas — ranging from Malaysian time-keeping to currency controls to industrialisation policies — and has even bulldozed such reforms through in the face of strident opposition, both at home and abroad.

Perhaps the fourth and longest-serving Prime Minister viewed his peremptory actions from the medical point of view, where the cure can sometimes be worse than the disease; perhaps he felt that the optimal development of his people — all Malaysians, and in particular the passive, lackadaisical Malays he cherished so dearly — were an end that justified his means. He himself admits to being goal-driven. "I wanted to see that the things I set out to do, got done. The satisfaction was from results," he explains in a recent exclusive interview, looking healthy and tanned from a riding holiday in the Andes. And he took a leaf from his medical books. "If you want to get well, you have to do things which are unpleasant and unpopular. In any case, anything you do will be criticised. I applied some medical methods, in that I tried to treat the disease instead of just the symptoms. Given enough time, you will see results."

His single-mindedness in pursuing the results he wants, and his seeming immunity to criticism, may cast him in a domineering light. "He's driven by objectives as some people are driven by atmospherics and intuitive irrationality. He decides what is the objective, and determination and persistence are what makes him successful. He is pursuing a specific objective in his mind," says Tan Sri Dr. Noordin Sopiee, Chairman and Chief Executive of the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS). Some have even described him as being autocratic. "In certain periods of history, you need an autocratic leader with vision, conviction, and the drive to make things happen," comments Dr. Tarcisius Chin, CEO of De La Salle Institute and Executive Secretary of the Asian Association of Management Organisations. "He got things done by being autocratic. We needed him at that point of our development."

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**Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad**

But former Cabinet Minister Dato' Napsiah Omar, who worked closely with

Mahathir, doesn't remember him as being autocratic or dictatorial. "Dictators don't hold meetings," she laughs. "He held long meetings — sometimes from 9:30am to 1:30pm."

Tolerance is hardly the trait of an autocrat. Noordin remembers Mahathir as being a very patient person. "He practically never loses his temper, and he suffers fools, maybe not gladly, but he tolerates them. He is an absolutely brilliant man. Clever people are normally impatient but I've seen him sit through the stupidest presentations and arguments with incredible patience. He's probably the cleverest man this country has ever had."

What accounts for Mahathir's brilliance? "He's got a very high IQ. And his concentration is amazing. Although he works very long hours, he can focus," says Noordin. Mahathir is also extremely willing to think out of the box. "He loves ideas that challenge convention. He has a capacity for thinking innovatively yet at the same time he is very logical and he has the patience to concentrate," adds Noordin.

One quirk which alarmed people – most of whom like to play it safe — was Mahathir's apparent lack of fear where taking risks was concerned. In a world where most were content to think small and aim low, he thought big and took what were decried as colossal risks. These include what cynics call Mahathir's follies — such as the grandiose Twin Towers, the Multimedia Super Corridor, the Sepang F1Circuit and the new administrative capital of Putrajaya.

Mahathir justifies these mega-projects, viewing them in the light of a lasting legacy: "These were projects we could afford. If we didn't know how to manage our wealth, we wouldn't have done them. If you want to do something, do it for posterity. Think of the next generation. These structures help project the right image for the country."

There is no denying that these signature projects have brought Malaysia under intense international scrutiny and generated immense coverage, good and bad. As the cliche goes: all publicity is good publicity; no publicity is bad publicity. Mahathir used the fanfare he generated — positive and negative — to put Malaysia on international radar screens. In fact, he made so much noise by decrying unfair Western policies that it was practically impossible for them to sideline Malaysia. Chin says, "He put Ma-

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laysia on the map. Without his penchant for publicity, they wouldn't know us."

Apart from being a magnet for the press, Mahathir is pretty savvy when it comes to business and finance, and proved it by his handling of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which coined a new phrase — Mahathironomics. Napsiah, commenting on the currency controls he instituted in the wake of financial raider George Soros' attacks on the Ringgit in the late 90s: "This was one of the most trying times for him. He had worked so hard to accumulate reserves, and Soros practically wiped them out. But he moved fast, pegged the US Dollar at RM3.80, and stopped the depletion of our reserves."

He took a lot of flak for that move, which was perceived as regressing Malaysia back to the financial dark ages, and tarred the country as *persona non grata* among international financiers and investors. Vitriolic attacks and insults were the order of the day from friend and foe alike, but his iconoclastic strategy was eventually vindicated; nonplussed by Malaysia's stability in the midst of Southeast Asian turmoil, the IMF and the World Bank grudgingly acknowledged his foresight in placing his country's interests above all else, and foreign investors began reweighting Malaysia in their portfolios in due course.

Such radical measures weren't taken blindly, but were the fruit of rigorous mental analysis. "When he doesn't have the information — as in the Soros case — he looks diligently for it," Napsiah adds. "He calls in the experts; he reads up on the subject; he looks for a solution; he takes criticism; he is decisive. And he is prepared to defend his position when he makes unpopular decisions that inevitably result in adverse reactions. He is meticulous and mentally very, very organised."

Given this attitude, "there are very few subjects he hasn't gone into in depth. Very often people don't succeed because they haven't penetrated a subject in depth. He has the facility for knowing and learning. He's very good at remembering and drawing out from his memory bank," says Noordin.

He is also known to burn the midnight oil, and expects the same of his ministers. An avid reader, he used to give his Cabinet ministers books that he found useful, urging them to read and upgrade their knowledge. The thought that springs to mind is, with all his responsibilities — Napsiah attests to the fact that he read all Cabinet papers and knew each subject in detail — where did he find the time?

Turning the clock seemed like a deceptively simple move, but he gained an extra hour, and so did the rest of Malaysia. Napsiah regards this as one of his best strokes of genius. "It was a decision he thought long and hard about before putting it into play," she says. This drew criticism, as did many of his other initiatives, but he steamrolled on regardless and unapologetic.

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It must have seemed to the world at large that Mahathir did not care what was said about him but this can be attributed to his confidence in his abilities and his strategies — which carried the weight of research and thought — and his conviction that what he was doing was for the common good. Dato' Dr. Nellie Tan-Wong, former finance chairman of the

World YWCA (World Young Women's Christian Association, Geneva) and a member of the Board of Trustees of Women's World Banking, New York, says that he was behaving like a 'politicpreneur', a term that she coined specially to describe him. "He managed Malaysia not so much to achieve net profit, as to be profitable," she says. "Achieving net profit means achieving net financial gain. Being profitable means benefiting an entire nation over the long-term, in terms of instant cash and social gain."

As a 'politicpreneur', he gave Malaysians a new sense of purpose and pride. "This is part of Malaysia's social gain," says Tan-Wong. "Once our mindset was that we were inferior. The psychological impact of his management techniques has been tremendous. Under his regime, we achieved an industrialised economy; he brought IT into Malaysian society. The direct impact of such tangible progress was to give Malaysian people a sense of confidence that they're as good as anybody else in this world. And that is his greatest achievement," says Noordin.

Is there anything Dr. M could have done better? "He chose some good people and he chose some bad people; he was trying to do an awful lot of things so he didn't have time to assess people," adds Noordin. "Sometimes people do make poor judgements. As a leader, you have to make snap decisions — and people can always hide their character."

Chin believes that Mahathir could have been more effective in two key areas: education and unity. "He didn't utilise education effectively enough to prepare Malaysians for the challenges of this era. The education system needs an overhaul; we have to switch from just material development to developing life, from emphasizing qualifications to emphasizing experience."

On unity, Chin is of the opinion that Mahathir could have brokered more for the nation. "The underbelly is much more important than the physical structure. Creating spirit, vibrancy, the capacity to invent and create and do good, should have been emphasized more."

"Maybe he was too driven!" Noordin quips. "He didn't achieve 90 per cent of his objectives because his objectives were too high. He wanted the Malays to be competitive, on par with the rest of the world — he didn't achieve this. He wanted a clean society and a good education system. These he did not achieve."

Mahathir himself admits that more could have been done. He says, "I feel I didn't do enough. What I wanted to do was change the culture of Malaysians — it's really the culture that determines whether you are successful or not. If you have the wrong value system, you will fail. I did not succeed in changing the culture."

But one of his greatest accomplishments must surely be casting Malaysia in the vital role of global spokesperson for disenfranchised, marginalised nations that have been sidelined or silenced; we have a stentorian international voice now, thanks to Mahathir's willingness to stand up and speak out. His outspokenness on international platforms has been applauded because — as some countries have readily admitted — "Mahathir says what we want to say, but cannot say." His philippics on neo-colonialism are especially provocative, and Freudian-like, and could hark back to his younger days under the yoke of the Japanese and the British occupiers. "To this day, he cannot tolerate colonialism. From his teenage days he has been outspoken, from the time he was no more than a child, he has spoken very strongly against colonialists. He is the greatest Malay leader since the Malacca sultanate and since Tun Perak," says Noordin.

In global eyes, particularly those belonging to the beleaguered Muslim world which has been under siege since September 11, Malaysia has become synonymous with Mahathir. In the frantic souks of Mecca and the serene mosques of Beijing, telling Muslims that you're from Malaysia draws that familiar refrain, "Malaysia boleh! Mahathir boleh!"

Adds Tan-Wong, "The management style of the 'politicpreneur' elicits a different kind of global respect for Malaysia. As any business person will tell you, it is one thing to feel confident, but completely another to have others acknowledge it, and perceive you as economically and socially independent, and unobliged to anyone."