

Mahathir - a moderate Muslim Machiavelli
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COMMENT You could love him or hate him but ignore him you could not.

Hardly a month would go by without some new initiative launched, the grandiose master plan tabled, new policy proffered. Say what you will about Mahathir Mohamad – may it be positive or negative – Dr M was a political phenomenon.

Even back in America, on the West's self-absorbed media radar screen, traces of Mahathir would surface from time to time. During the Silicon Valley revolution in the 90s, it caught Malaysia's PM making the West's money rounds, peddling his multimedia super-corridor like some software salesman.

During the Asian Financial Crisis, he positioned himself as the 'Conscience of the East', berating Wall Street (and sometimes baiting the Jews) for its destructive "shorting" attacks on his region's currencies. And within Malaysia itself, of course, Mahathir's name became synonymous with controversy and contradiction.

But outside the country, his legacy will increasingly be viewed in the context of the 'Clash of Civilisations' issue that seemingly has replaced the old Cold War as the chief obsession of the West.

This is a main theme of my new book 'Conversations With Mahathir Mohamad', the second volume in the 'Giants of Asia' series (next up: another controversial former prime minister, Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra).

The question of legacy is important because history may well decide to downplay Mahathir's serious flaws and rhetorical excesses and in the final analysis, position him as one of the late 20th century's most important Muslim leaders. History may well decide that Dr M was a notably successful modern moderate Muslim Machiavelli at the very time the rise of the al-Qaeda was so unnerving to the West.

In the United States, you see, when the label "Muslim" is used, it tends to invoke flaming skyscrapers toppled to the ground. Jihads, however obscurely aimed or ambiguously intended, make Americans jittery. In fact, much of the US nation continues to suffer from a post-911 traumatic stress syndrome. So today Muslims will not likely get picked up on the media radar screen over here unless they're creating a clear and present danger.

But most Muslims go about their daily business like the rest of us – raising families, holding onto jobs, trying to make their way through life's ups and downs. What's especially lost on the West is the track record of those gifted, moderate Muslims whose records of accomplishment remain below our radar precisely because their moderation seems so categorically un-newsworthy.

Turning fundamentalism on its head

It is this larger and grander story of the mainstream Muslim that the West fails to absorb. The extraordinary Machiavellian tricks of the moderation trade that are required of a Muslim leader needing to keep his political balance while guiding the nation economically are hardly

any less spectacular for their complexity than a complex terrorist plot. Moderation in the pursuit of a better life for all is no vice – and its achievement is clearly a notable virtue of governance.

But Mahathir, in my conversations with him, was in aggressive denial about his moderation. In fact, to his face, it will get you nowhere to call him a “moderate.” He doesn't like it and in fact he will deny it.

To deflect any suggestion that his brand of Islamism is anything but tough-minded and Quran-pious, Dr M will insist his true religion is Muslim fundamentalism at its most intelligently fundamentalist. And so may no “ultra” Muslim – no pure-as-the-driven-Islamic-snow mullah – be given reason to depict him as some softie that's been genetically re-engineered into some Western secular poodle.

Malaysians of course understand that Dr M is nothing if not clever. And thus its longest-running PM (1982-2003) turns “fundamentalism” on its head by insisting that, fundamentally, Islam is moderation itself. “So, I adhere to that teaching – become a Muslim fundamentalist, and Muslim fundamentalism must let me be moderate,” he told me, rather cleverly – but not, I think, insincerely.

More than verbal wordplay animates the good doctor. I am convinced, after the intense conversational sessions for the book, that his international pacifism (he is virtually anti-war) arises from his own personal philosophy – and from his public insistence of Islam as a powerfully peaceful religion.

Accordingly, I became convinced that his occasional resort to domestic repression – via the invocation of Malaysia's internal security laws – was in fact painful and aberrational, not at all joyful.

Yes, it is fair to say that he was not adverse to resort to hard power – though in his conversations with me he expressed deep remorse over handing the police so much power at times. But he admitted that every resort to repression was probably a symptom of failure. (It is not hard to believe that somewhere in his heart, he harbours the wish that the Anwar Ibrahim mess has been handled differently – and better.)

It was certainly illuminating when I asked him about Machiavelli's famous dilemma – Whether it is better for the Prince to be loved or feared. His response was quite different from that of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.

The subject of my first book in the Giants of Asia series ('Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew') said that, if he had to choose, he would choose fear over love. But Mahathir's choice was – rather unabashedly expressed – to want to be loved.

But will the average Malaysian believe this? Not being the average Malaysia, I have no idea. But when he answered this way, I no more doubted the sincerity of his answer than the sincerity of LKY's.

A man of contradictions

Yes, Mahathir is a man of contradictions. And especially for the sympathetic Western journalist, the effort to scope out this complex Machiavellian Muslim was made much more difficult by his troubling – and dreary – attacks on Jews and Israel, just about whenever he needed someone to blame with whose demonisation his constituency would have no special

quarrel.

But he jabbed at this convenient punching bag too much, whatever the demands of domestic politics. So is he in fact an anti-Semite?

It was difficult, sitting in his stratospheric office in Petronas Tower One, or in his Perdana Foundation crib in Putrajaya, to imagine this clever, sophisticated man as out-and-out anti-Semitic. Others share this doubt, too.

Consider the judgment of former Asian Wall Street Journal editor Barry Wain, in his rigorously detailed, scholarly bestseller 'Malaysian Maverick' (2009): "...Almost no one who knew him well or observed him at close range for any length of time believed he was anti-Semitic."

That Mahathir resorted to seemingly anti-Semitic language proves to me not that he has anti-Semite sentiments but that he was a Muslim Machiavellian. He used whatever tools, rhetorical or whatever, he could get his hands to keep his people and his party with him - and his country moving forward.

The bottom line is that Mahathir's 22-years of moderate Muslim Machiavellianism left behind a country far more developed than it was in 1982 when his reign began. His successors are now notably hard-pressed to maintain the same pace.

They also seem hard-pressed to keep Malaysia as calm and productive. Dr M himself expresses enormous satisfaction that, during his time, all more or less remained quiet on the ethnic and religious tension front.

He imagines that he helped position the country somewhere between Turkey, on the one hand, and Iran on the other. That made great sense. It's doubtful that a rigidly secular governance approach would work for Malaysia, or that a purely Islamic Republic of the Iran variety would be remotely good for it.

Malaysia, for all its problems, is admired internationally precisely because of its moderate Muslim modernisation. Can anyone imagine Malaysia erupting in the manner of Egypt? Certainly it could not have happened on Dr M's watch.

Construct this notion in another, even more provocative way: Can anyone imagine Egypt coming to a stop, as it has this past week, if its leader these past decades had not been the clumsy Hosni Mubarak but the clever Mahathir Mohamad? This is the implicit thesis of my new book 'Conversations With Mahathir Mohamad', and it offers significant international implications.

It is time for Malaysians to give this devil his due.

TOM PLATE is author of 'Conversations With Mahathir Mohamad', just published by Marshall Cavendish, and is the newly appointed distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is a veteran American journalist whose regularly syndicated columns on Asia, since 1996, have appeared in newspapers around the world. The next 'Giants of Asia' book will focus on Thaksin Sinawatra, until the 2006 coup in Thailand that country's longest running democratically elected prime minister.

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