

Mahathir was right, wasn't he?
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Mahathir Mohamad had wanted to read law in London. Despite his outstanding results, his application for a scholarship to do so in London was allegedly overlooked by the British colonial administration during the post World War II chaos. Philip Bowering, a senior columnist, once conjectured this bitter experience deepened Mahathir's subcontinental anti-colonial stance.

Yet the failure to follow in the footsteps of Tunku Abdul Rahman (right) and Abdul Razak Hussein - both of whom later became prime minister - to obtain a law degree did not stop the eloquent but sharp-tongued man from establishing himself as a ruthless politician whose career would span more than five decades.

In fact, his flair for wordplay and ability to manipulate people's intelligence have been so impressive that even a seasoned commentator by the name of Tom Plate is willing to reconsider the definition of 'Islamic fundamentalism' and acknowledge him as a 'moderate Muslim Machiavelli'!

Recently, many have been outraged by Mahathir's rancorous remarks that the Malay peninsula used to be widely known as Tanah Melayu and non-Malays should readily accept the language and culture of the 'dominant' race. Mahathir, of course, became a 'constitutional Malay' by ditching the Indian side of his heritage and would love to see the entire Malaysian population do the same.

But why do the non-Malays only protest out loud whenever the resentful man says things that are seen to be racist against us?

Over the years, no politician has insulted the Malay community more than Mahathir, the self-styled 'Malay prophet'. Time and again, he trampled on the dignity of the ordinary Malays, almost turning the practice into pastime.

In the book, *The Malay Dilemma*, that made him an overnight superstar, he adhered to the colonial understandings of the Malays and argued that the community must fight pervasive 'indolence' tooth and nail in order to become successful like the Chinese and Indian immigrants. Whenever his political fortunes were threatened, he would not hesitate to resort to blaming the non-Malays while chastising the Malays for being 'ingrates'.

Clearly out, but not down

At the height of the reformasi movement, he openly criticised the Malays who had turned against him for being 'haprak' (useless), and lamented their 'forgetfulness' (Melayu mudah lupa) just before he 'stepped down'. He is clearly out, but not down.

In all these instances, virtually no non-Malay lifted a finger and rebutted Mahathir. In fact, many were quietly gleeful because Mahathir had spoken on something that they had long perceived to be the 'Malay disease' but would not be able to say it publicly.

For all the cry over racism and ethnic divisions among Malaysians, I am rather surprised very few have actually realised whenever Mahathir churns out race-centric statements, he

only aggravates the mistrust between us.

To unite the Malays behind him, he would say the Chinese (and the Indians to a lesser extent) are a threat because they are 'economically dominant'. Many Malays would perhaps nod in agreement. He then turns around and tell the world he has 'failed' to raise the Malays as a successful people because their 'laziness' is too ingrained. This time, the non-Malays would applaud in private and feel vindicated.

Hence, each and every uproar that Mahathir creates only ensures there is plenty of heat but absolutely no light. Where does all this lead us?

Back in the 1990s, when the economy was booming and the stock market flourishing, much of Malaysia was indulged in making money while looking for a more affluent future. It was during these 'good old days' that Mahathir dismantled public integrity with corruption and an iron rule.

He also continued to sow seeds of racial and religious discords as the wider society was blinded by a false sense of material comfort. In other words, we were all bought off although all the evil legislations and injustices that we look askance at today had always been there.

I still believe *The Myth of the Lazy Native* by the late Syed Hussein Alatas is a seriously under-appreciated book, at least in comparison to Mahathir's racist and ill-researched *Malay Dilemma*.

As Syed Hussein Alatas rightly points out, it was the Spanish, Dutch and British colonialists who, having been disappointed by the refusal of the native populations in the Philippines, Java and the Malay peninsula to participate in the exploitative colonial capitalism, came up with the theory of 'native indolence' which also assessed the contribution of the migrant communities rather positively.

The Malays, with land of their own to toil, were naturally disinterested in working for a colonial administration that would suck up most of the benefits at the end. But the migrants had no option but were forced into a form of slavery, especially the Indians. For the Malays, it was a rational choice to be out; for the non-Malays, it was a compulsion to be in.

This divide-and-rule policy ensured minimal contact (and hence understanding) between races, and effectively prevented a cross-ethnic anti-colonial movement from being formed.

Distorted by colonial discourse

When colonial rule became untenable in the 1950s, the British were ready to hand power to Umno in return for economic interests. The MCA and the MIC joined in as freeloaders. The extent to which the race-based coalition went to exploit race issues in the latter years clearly put the British to shame.

Precisely because our perception of race is so much distorted by the colonial discourse, we often feel Mahathir is right to run down the Malays, not knowing that much of the Malay community holds the same stereotype of the Chinese and the Indians.

We never really believe the Malay fisherman in Terengganu, the street wantan mee seller in KL, the Indian rubber-tapper in Kedah and even the seriously marginalised Penan in Sarawak are equally hardworking and facing risks of various kinds. Why should they be

stigmatised by politicians who only seek to divide the working class people just to safeguard their ill-gotten gains?

Mahathir may appear to be a Malay fighter, but he has been internally colonised for much of his life. He would go around the country urging the Malays to work hard, but is never bothered to explain how did his children become billionaires at a young age.

Twenty-two years of his rule only has only left the country with an entrenched culture of corruption and disappearance of public integrity. While we must respect and defend even his freedom to speak, we must search deep in ourselves as to whether we, too, have been poisoned by his racial profiling.

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