

Awaiting Dr M's memoirs
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I bumped into Daim Zainuddin, once the second most powerful man in Malaysia, at a diplomatic function in 2004. He told me Dr Mahathir Mohamad was already halfway through writing his memoirs. I couldn't help being amazed at the former prime minister's diligence even in retirement.

Nearly seven years on, the public is yet to see the book. But I have no reason to doubt Mahathir is in the process of recollecting his experiences as prime minister, for Tom Plate mentions in his book *Doctor M: Operation Malaysia* that he himself has seen a bound copy of the memoirs.

So, what is keeping Mahathir from publishing them? If he so fervently hopes to inculcate Malaysians with discipline and efficiency, surely he would continue to set himself an example by completing a book of vast significance?

Plate says Mahathir keeps changing the contents, and the censorship 'imposed' by the Umno-led government does not help especially when certain elements are deemed a threat to 'national security'.

But Malaysians - especially those who have lived through his premiership in admiration but mostly in fear - have the right to hear the man's versions of many stories. The procrastination only leads me to surmise that Mahathir keeps abreast of the latest political developments and updates the contents accordingly, so that he can eventually present a finished book that contains necessary defence and rebuttals.

Intricate relationships among the high and mighty

I certainly don't buy the argument that a prime minister's memoirs could pose a threat to the nation simply because there are 'undesirable' elements in them. The more likely factor is the intricate relationships among the high and mighty in government that prevent Mahathir from speaking freely.

After all, the amounts of scandals and insidious dealings, coupled with the unmaking of public institutions under his watch, are sufficient to ensure whoever implicated by him can easily expose his share of dirty linens, which are aplenty!

Still, I must admit I am wrong to have thought Mahathir cared not about historical judgment or legacy of any sort. He told Plate it was the police who had wanted to launch the infamous Operasi Lalang in October 1987, and he was in some way 'powerless' to stop them.

"My reputation is gone... You have to learn to live with the people with the guns," he says, and that sounds rather scary to anyone who cherishes the rule of law.

It is incredulous that the usually argumentative, forceful and abrasive Mahathir would simply have given in to the police. Here, Plate is clearly ill-informed on at least two points.

First, as many have pointed out, Mahathir who was also Home Minister at the time could have turned down the request by the police to extend the detention period after 60 days,

yet he readily signed it.

Secondly, Mahathir seeks to impress upon Plate that he had been fair in responding to the political crisis by having certain Umno members arrested also over racist speeches - ostensibly on police advice.

But one name was conspicuously absent from the list, and that was Najib Abdul Razak who had spoken 'passionately' in a highly charged rally organised by Pemuda Umno just before the crackdown. (Non-Malays journalists who were there to cover the event were later advised by the police to leave the venue for safety's sake.)

If anything, Najib's last-minute switch to Team A in the seriously divided Umno party elections in April 1987 proved decisive to Mahathir's Pyrrhic victory over Team B. If Mahathir and Hanif Omar, the then-IGP, had been judicious, why was Najib off the hook?

But it is Mahathir's selective amnesia - which has become classic since the Lingam Tape incident - that provides further entertainment. Reading through Plate's book, one gets a fair picture that while ageing physically, the man's mind remains sharp and his memory intact. He therefore has to do considerably more to convince a sceptical public that he had indeed met with the opposition but failed to save them from the ISA!

Not questioned on national security

Furthermore, most of those who were arrested following Anwar Ibrahim's incarceration in 1999 - either under the ISA or other draconian laws - were categorically questioned on everything ranging from their staunch support for the opposition to private lives, but nothing on national security.

Excuse me for being naïve, for until then I knew not it was Bukit Aman's business to find out which side of the political divide people are on, and which man or woman that one falls in love with.

Knowing how much non-Malays - in addition to the increasing number of Malays since 1998 - have grown to hate him in recent years, Mahathir informs Plate that he had worked closely with the Chinese and the Indians. But his understanding of ethnic relations is at best distorted and at worst poisonous.

He admits since Malaysia cannot get rid of the Chinese, so it is better to accept them or the country would not be able to construct anything. In saying this, he again insults the intelligence of the countless construction workers who sweat and bleed under the scorching sun. Mahathir is keen to project himself as a people's man, but he consistently prized developers and contractors - **such as** Liew Kee Sin of SP Setia - more than labourers. Another paradox of Mahathirism.

Mahathir is also misguidedly proud that he had provided 'stable conditions' in which the Chinese could do business and thereby maintain a balanced relationship with the indigenous communities.

I find this funniest, as if all that Chinese Malaysians care is just financial security. But a part-time Chinese myself - for my full-time identity is human being - I will leave it to the Chinese to show that, contrary to Mahathir's colonialist perception, they are preoccupied with the notions of justice, transparency and integrity.

There are now more signs that the once most ruthless leader in Malaysia is seriously concerned about how future generations will remember him. He now claims his attempt to abolish the ISA was frustrated by the police (again!), which is as good as saying Adolf Hitler had toyed with affirmative action for the Jews.

Instead of offering sketchy views and piecemeal opinions, Mahathir should really concentrate on finishing his memoirs and let his Maker be the ultimate judge. His continued delay is most disappointing. Has cowardice got the better of him as the man is nearing the end of his mundane journey?

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