

**Dr M, the master revisionist**  
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COMMENT Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's attempt at historical revisionism on the ISA arrests of 1987 is amusing on some counts. On one score at least, it is all of a piece with a salient aspect of his political persona. And that's not amusing.

This trait is captured in the words of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's story, 'Through the Looking Glass'.

There, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

A perplexed Alice demurs: "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things."

To that Humpty Dumpty replied: "The question is which is to be master – that's all."

On the 1987 ISA arrests and a slew of other issues, there can be little doubt as to who was master and now, when retrospectives are in, who intends to continue to be master.

One could say the latter inclination is the more feasible when you have surrogates as servile as the former inspector-general of police, Hanif Omar, who is now virtually saying that Malaysia was a police state in 1987.

Nowhere in the ISA Act has the power to continue to detain a person for a period of two years after the initial two-month period of interrogation by the police vested in anyone else except the home minister.

Presently, Mahathir claims that he did not want the detentions – just over 100 politicians and social activists were carted off to Kamunting from late October 1987. He now says it was the police that insisted on it.

You don't have to advert to Humpty Dumpty to define a police state: it is when police power overrides that of the elected civilian authority.

A bedrock tenet of constitutional governance is the deferment of the military to the elected civilian authority and of the police to the rule of law.

By 1987, Hanif Omar had returned to his IGP post from study leave, armed with a law degree from the University of Buckingham in England where he must have had gleanings on such concepts as the rule of law.

The knowledge could not have mattered much to Hanif. If Mahathir is now to be believed, when faced in 1987 with a prime minister-cum-home minister who was reluctant to exercise the powers to detain without trial, the neophyte law graduate insisted on them, thereby abrogating the clause in the ISA Act that vests that discretion on the minister only.

Sounds like Malaysia were a police state, in October 1987 at least.

## **He calls himself fundamentalist**

Mahathir's revisionist yen is not just confined to the episode concerning the ISA arrests of 1987.

Probably, his most serious act of revisionism was when he pronounced Malaysia a model Islamic state in September 2001.

That was in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 incident when national and international forums were convulsed with the debate on political Islam and the variety of its expressions.

Typically preemptive, Mahathir decided to garner for his party, Umno, a frontal position in the debate by positioning the Malaysian state as already having attained to Islamic propriety, if not perfection.

Until that point in time, most disputants in the debate were agreed that a state would have to implement syariah law to be able to call itself Islamic.

But, in true Humpty Dumpty-fashion, Mahathir subsumed under his definition of an Islamic state, features such as a legal code largely based on common law, licensed gambling and alcohol production - that are more characteristic of a secular polity than a theocratic one.

Before Mahathir lurched into the debate over whether Malaysia was already a model Islamic state, he had, on occasion, tried to define himself as a fundamentalist Muslim. This was an attempt to pull the rug from under the feet of his fundamentalist Islamic critics.

As justification for calling himself fundamentalist, Mahathir argued that his views and practice of the faith were mainstream and should be considered a fundamentalist expression of the faith.

He recently rehashed the argument in interviews with the American author Tom Plate - of the 'Giants of Asia' book series - which in its latest installment features Mahathir.

For starters, anyone calling himself a fundamentalist would not deign to suggest that the popularity of beards at the time of the Prophet Mohamad was because razor blades were not yet invented, as the clean shaven Mahathir once averred. That suggestion savoured of sacrilege, as several appalled Islamic preachers were quick to point out.

Furthermore, because Muslims believe that the Holy Koran is the inerrant word of God given to Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel, that salient datum affords little interpretive latitude to adherents.

By extension, it takes a very brave man - not to mention, one with a penchant for Machiavellian manoeuvre - to claim that he's fundamentalist.

## **A giant of Asia?**

But Mahathir is unfazed by scruples over the exactness of definitions. One may well ask: Why should he be?

When you have professors as erudite as Tom Plate describing Mahathir as a "modern Muslim Machiavelli", as the American academic did in interviews publicising his book on a supposed giant of Asia, you have a feel for the confusion that is fuel in the tank of a mountebank like

Mahathir.

Anyone who has had a more than passing familiarity with the theories of the 15th century Florentine political scientist would know, one cannot be a subscriber to monotheistic religion and be Machiavellian.

Niccolo Machiavelli was a pagan nihilist whose theories about how rulers ought to win and keep power and make their rule successful were premised on there being no such thing as a judgmental deity in the afterlife.

In that afterlife, Humpty Dumpty's question of "which is to be master" does not arise.

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