

**'Malaysians missed point of Operasi Lalang'**  
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If Dr Mahathir Mohamad is lying about his role in the 1987 clampdown 'Operasi Lalang', it is an opportunity for Malaysians to crucify him, but for the author of the latest book on the former prime minister, Tom Plate, the revelation is more pertinent.

"Now, if he is lying, fine, then you guys find out. But if he is telling the truth, you're learning some things about your political system that you did not know and to me, something you didn't know - control over the military and police by elected civilians - are key aspects," said Plate.

By getting caught up with the debate over whether Mahathir had lied when he said he did not authorise the detentions without trial, Plate said, Malaysians missed out on an important question, that was whether their leaders have control over the police force?

"It was very striking (what Mahathir said about the police sidelining his advice), and I never heard a leader say that it is very hard to control the police and that once you exercise the police option, it can get out of hand," he said.

Recalling the crackdown in the book Doctor M: Operation Malaysia. Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad, the former premier tells the career journalist that he had "no absolute power" over the police force and that "you have to learn to live with the people with guns".

Plate (left) said it struck him that Mahathir's admittance was indeed "a fact", following his conversation with former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who also related incidents of police operations that went awry.

"He (Mahathir) did say that he didn't mean to dump (the blame) on the police. Lots of police are hardworking dedicated public servants... but he didn't pull back from his essential statements, which I take are very controversial and unknown to extremely informed Malaysian journalists," he said.

However, the author does not discount the notion that the book may not be completely true, as it was Mahathir's "remembrance of what reality was".

**'Very select version of history'**

"Whether it is Winston Churchill or (Bill) Clinton doing their memoirs, people who read them will say they are very select versions of history. I don't think there's any memoir written about which people say it's a 100 percent accurate version," Plate said, although admitting that the book "is not Mahathir's ghost-written memoir".

In the book, Mahathir says he was "furious" when police moved to arrest 106 people, including political dissidents, under the Internal Security Act in 1987, after he had given assurance that no such thing will happen at a meeting with them (the dissidents).

"My credibility is gone," the statesman is quoted as saying.

This drew further tongue-lashing from several the opposition leaders who had been arrested

then, who said no such meeting with Mahathir ever took place.

The content of the book has also been harshly criticised by historians who have accused Mahathir of "whitewashing" his "dark past" and Plate for accepting the former's account of events at face value.

However, Plate asserted that the book was about "conversations... it's not political biography. In that atmosphere, the idea is that you - the reader - will feel like a fly on the wall, there's an element of intimacy.

### **'Job of journalist to put the person at ease'**

"The whole point of this particular methodology is to draw the person out of the shell. If you're shouting at the person and saying 'you're a bum' and stuff like that, their guard goes up, they go into their shell and you won't have a whole book of conversations.

"Therefore it's the job of the journalist to put the person at ease, make the person comfortable with the format so they say things they never said before... otherwise you just get the boiler plate," he added.

Mahathir's version of 'Operasi Lalang' has been substantiated by a few people, including then police chief Mohd Hanif Omar, who reiterated that the decision to arrest was made by the police to curb threats of a racial riot.

In the approximately 10 hours he spent with Mahathir, Plate said that he was attempting to unravel accusations of anti-Semitism against the leader.

"As a politician, he was playing to his audience. He was feeding his people the red meat and I was able to figure out why he did it.

"It gave him street cred with his constituencies. But I think there is a moral dimension to the statements that he makes, whether or not they were politically effective.

"I don't think he is an anti-Semite. My evidence is evidence that you have, which is in the chapters, and it goes down to instinct," he said.

Other than dismissing claims of anti-Semitic tendencies in Mahathir, Plate also defended the former leader's hardline reaction to dissent.

Mahathir has been known to have a low tolerance for dissenting views, evident, for example, from long line of deputies drummed out of service.

Musa Hitam, Ghafar Baba and Anwar Ibrahim are among those dropped for "irreconcilable differences" or seen as threats.

"If you listen to Mahathir, he says 'I am actually a democrat', but (Singapore Prime Minister) Lee Kuan Yew isn't a democrat.

### **'Mahathir wants the opposition to shut up'**

"(Mahathir) says 'you really need an opposition, an opposition keeps you honest and peppers you with thoughts, etc, but not so much of an opposition that could actually take over, which shows you the kind of dissent he tolerated.

"I think it's pretty clear reading in the book that his attitude towards dissent is superficially positive, but the bottom line is that he wants to listen to them and he wants them to shut up," Plate said.

Pressed whether such intolerance was not what one would call "soft-authoritarianism", Plate said even the United States government threw dissenters into jail.

"We put people in jail, for example, the Black Panthers, the left wingers.

"I think there is an element in every system. In the US, if you are an extreme leftist, you can assume you are being followed by the FBI, and your conversations are taped. Fear is a control device not unique to Malaysia."

Plate explained that he described Mahathir as a "moderate Muslim Machiavelli" because Machiavelli's morality was simply the 'end justifies the means', very similar to Mahathir's position:

"(But) then there were some who thought (the Prince) was good because (such tactics made) Italy stronger."

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