

**Dr M out to settle scores in memoirs**  
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**COMMENT** So Dr Mahathir Mohamad's memoirs are finally out. It's has a fetching title, 'A Doctor in the House'.

The former prime minister would have made a good sub-editor. His previous book 'Blogging to Unblock' also sported a catchy title.

Months after retiring from the premiership in late October 2003, Mahathir was said to be making good progress on his memoirs.

Given his age - Mahathir was an advanced septuagenarian on his retirement - and speed of composition, his publishers were on course to launch his memoirs within two years of his leaving office.

But distractions, like the effort of turfing out his apparently refractory successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and the foray into bolstering Malay rights group Perkasa, must have slowed Mahathir.

'A Doctor in the House' is being published a good seven years and four months after Mahathir retired as prime minister.

One would have thought that the long span between retirement from the public arena and the written self-description of a life lived in its glare would have been aids to rumination.

But no, Mahathir is not the ruminative sort. There is little in the book that smacks of reconsiderations; revisionary papering-over, yes (with respect to his use - he now says, it was the police who insisted on it - of the Internal Security Act), but no mediation by second thoughts, afterwords, and late perspectives, of episodes torn from the fraught and living moment.

**Low vantage point**

The unexamined life, said Socrates, is not worth living.

When it is a long life, especially one filled with combat, and the teller, afterwards, speaks of it like he's in perpetual argument, you see the point of the Greek sage's stricture: a life lived in the trenches ought to be told from a vantage point more elevated than a peephole.

Mahathir's version of the cause célèbre of his tenure as PM - the sacking of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim - does not rise above the level of the keyhole.

He extracts episodes from their dense context and, with nary a thought for their complexity, secretes them through the prism of his self-interested standpoint. The upshot: readers are saddled with a screed rather than a story, with canards more than chronicles.

The veracity of what is recounted in 'A Doctor in the House' would have to be juxtaposed with other accounts as may be available.

### **Take Anwar's account of when he first met Mahathir.**

It was in 1971 at a leading club in Kuala Lumpur. It was Ramadan; no prizes for guessing who was the more cognisant of the Muslim holy month's obligations when the stewards came around to take an order. There was no note of reproach or triumphalism when Anwar recalled the episode; only a knowing smile at the foibles of human nature.

The betting is it will stay that way when it comes time for Anwar to pen his memoirs, which would be a feat of nonjudgmental understanding, the greater would that be by reason of the travails he has had to endure on account of his imputed sexual orientation.

### **Crass partisanship**

Take, also, the recall of a one-time head of the Election Commission who advised Mahathir on the need for changes to campaign rules. This man had trained under former deputy prime minister and home minister, the redoubtable Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, and thus had a sense of fair play stronger than the pull of crass partisanship.

When he told Mahathir that some campaign rules unduly favoured the incumbents, the PM's riposte was that the fact the rules favoured the incumbents was not sufficient reason to change them.

Now Mahathir asks to be believed that he did not want to detain people under the ISA in 1987 and had indeed wanted the law amended or removed from the statute books against the objections of the police.

These episodes are retailed here, not for the purpose of denigration of the once-and-still mighty.

When you have an account as gaudy as 'A Doctor in the House', you have to trawl over a wide area and juxtapose what you may find against what is being put out and sieve the lot for telling tidbits that are more emblematic of character than entire tomes.

Otherwise readers would be at the mercy of the one-eyed jacks.