

Dr M's memoirs not the final word
Malaysiakini.com
March 11, 2011

COMMENT The self-description of a life in an autobiography or its stepchild, memoirs, is an uneasy task to anyone who has lived in the maw of febrile political events.

Practitioners find it difficult to tread the line between their involvement and the detachment that is necessary if their narratives are to be considered as contributions to the historical record.

Inability to steer by that fine thread usually results in the genre falling between two stools: the self-serving tract or the evasive testimonial.

But what about the mendacious account, the one that's deceitful about the facts and gives such a patently one-sided version that the stones cry out for reproof?

Those versions can only be gainsaid by the accounts of other participants in the same dramas, personae not necessarily more capable of the detachment that helps build up the historical record, but whose accounts could serve the purpose of dispatching drivel to where it ought: the trash bin.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's much-awaited memoirs, 'A Doctor in the House', reportedly went through 17 drafts before it was launched earlier this week, something like seven years and four months after his retirement.

The wait appeared to take as long as his premiership, which was 22 years and three-and-a-half months – too long a span, as even Mahathir admits, but the fault for that, typically, was not his.

The blame lay in Anwar Ibrahim's alleged sexual misdeeds which caused a storm whose swells Mahathir had to navigate safely before actually handing over to another successor.

As ever, with Mahathir, the fault is with the others.

A season of memoir-publication

Whether that was always true can somewhat be deduced from the accounts of Mahathir's sometime coadjutors, former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam and former finance minister Daim Zainuddin.

Both were about to come out with their memoirs but held back to allow their former boss to bat first in Malaysia's hitherto unprecedented season of memoir-publication.

Musa and Daim are expected to rewrite parts of their books in response to Mahathir's patently self-serving account of affrays in which Musa and Daim were part.

Daim's account would be the more eagerly awaited as Mahathir has implied he had to be jettisoned because of the miasma of corruption that clung to the former economic czar.

Mahathir also says in his memoirs that Daim was covertly against the capital controls he

introduced in 1998 in the face of the currency and stock market crisis that laid siege to East Asian economies.

Certainly, Daim would have something to say about all this. It has been bruited about on the grapevine that he felt he did a lot for Mahathir and that the latter was ungrateful for what Daim did to rescue the economy twice, in the recession of 1985-87 and the crisis of 1997-98.

In retrospect, a career such as Daim's – covertly powerful, beneficent and sinister in equal parts – could only have been possible under an authoritarian leader like Mahathir.

Their alliance was a potent one of convenience. Both were men of high and scheming intelligence. Both had their share of arrogance, greed and ambition; both wore it with one another the way two temporarily allied conspirators could, probably sublimating the inherent tensions in a stream of acerbic commentary on the menagerie of knaves and inferiors around them.

Musa to return salvo?

With Musa, Mahathir's relationship would have been different. He was a genuine democrat where Mahathir was an authoritarian to the manner born.

Mahathir claims he told home minister Musa that he did not want the ISA to be used during his term of office.

Well, Mahathir has been on record as saying many things, such as that Musa, Ghafar Baba and Anwar would succeed him when he left the office of PM.

In the event, only his fourth deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, succeeded to the office – and Mahathir promptly helped yank him off the stage; so much for the assurances of Mahathir.

Musa used to say that after his exit from active politics, whenever he met Mahathir on a social basis, his former boss would banter with him, reminding him, only half in jest, of how Musa had stabbed him in the back.

From Musa's forthcoming memoirs, presumably, we can get to know what he felt about Mahathir's barb and its justification or lack thereof. His account, like Daim's, is bound to be grist for the chattering classes.

'May you live in interesting times' goes the Chinese saying that has particular resonance for Malaysian politics.

In fact, there's doubt about its Chinese provenance, like the doubt Mahathir conjures about his ancestry, because the saying appears naturally crafted for the byzantine ways of Malaysian politics.

The upcoming memoirs of Daim and Musa should help us around the twists and turns. But there's no certainty that Mahathir would not, subsequently, add another round of convolution to the whole morass.