

**Factual veracity of Dr M's memoirs questioned**  
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COMMENT In the Internet age, it does no good for public figures to use their memoirs as a vehicle for the discharge of rancour.

If one does, then the four W

's – who, what, when and where – of journalistic veracity must be unassailable, for the account to stand the test of credibility.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad seems to be discovering this unpleasant reality.

Within a week of the publication of 'A Doctor in the House', a recollection of his life, the facts as he retails them are being contested.

Mahathir tells in his memoirs of his first visit to Singapore, months after he became PM in July 1981.

He said he felt "sorely used" on that occasion as he was not properly greeted at the Prime Minister's Office; was not given a state dinner, and that 20 minutes into a courtesy call on Singapore president Dr Benjamin Sheares, an aide interjected to tell the head of state that he had another appointment.

It now transpires that Sheares died in May 1981 and the alleged slights endured by Mahathir were of a visit that took place in December that year.

"People do forget, you know," parried Mahathir when the discrepancy was pointed out to him.

An ego as prickly as Mahathir's is apt to remember a slight, not the context in which it was visited. The question is, over time, to what uses will he put the memory of those rebuffs?

To self-serving ends, it would increasingly appear, as targets of Mahathir's ire speak into the public record, either through their own written recollections, as Daim Zainuddin and Musa Hitam are shortly expected to do, or through rebuttals or denials by Anwar Ibrahim or Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, as the latter duo have already done with respect to sundry aspersions cast on them.

If the initial responses to his memoirs are any indication, 'A Doctor in the House' will do little to rescue the credibility of Mahathir as witness to the events he recapitulates.

It is understandable that a memoirist would attempt to vindicate his role in the events he starred in. But that attempt would unravel if he or she treats the facts cavalierly. The dictum of Daniel Patrick Moynihan is instructive: "You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts."

**Unscientific and poorly researched**

Mahathir's first foray into authorship, 'The Malay Dilemma', vented opinions about the Malays that were unscientific and poorly researched.

One of the puzzles of his standing as a champion of the Malay position in the country's politics is that he ascended to that status despite the dim view of the race's capacity for advancement, as evidenced by what is said in 'The Malay Dilemma.'

Attempts were made by contemporaries to rebut those opinions, most notably by the late academician

Syed Hussein Alatas, who was responsible for a slender tract 'Siapa Yang Buta?' (Who is More Blinkered?), which exposed as unscientific and poorly researched the opinions espoused by Mahathir in his diatribe and in 'Revolusi Mental' (Mental Revolution), a polemic whose authors were assorted Umno politicians.

These books, written in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969, riots, aired analyses of the socio-economic plight of the Malays and what must be done to alleviate it.

The books jostled for public attention but because there was no tradition of public discourse in Malaysia at the time - the Internet was decades down the road - only the opinions of the ruling elites mattered.

Furthermore, the banning of 'The Malay Dilemma' had the unfortunate effect of giving a spurious legitimacy to Mahathir's views, as if the fact that his book was contraband meant that the opinions propounded in it were necessarily cogent.

If the book had not been banned and the author not been sacked from Umno, it is doubted that Mahathir's career would have gained the springboard from which he vaulted to the top positions in Umno.

In the event, terminal illnesses to Abdul Razak Hussein and Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Razak's unease with Harun Idris' Umno Youth-fuelled ascendancy, Hussein Onn's being unduly enamoured with Ghazali Shafie, Ghafar Baba's lack of tertiary education and Razaleigh Hamzah's unpreparedness due to relative youth - were the potpourri of factors that enabled Mahathir to ghost through to the No 1 position.

Essentially, Mahathir came in from left field and upended the whole arena.

Now a man who essentially rose to fame on the strength of a specious book has written a recollection that purports to be history, but its positing of the facts on which that history was made may prove to be as brittle as the ego that prompts the view.

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