

An American's encounter with Dr M
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COMMENT Tom Plate is a veteran media man and long-time Asia-watcher, though he does have the handicap of being American - this much was observed by Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he met Plate in 2009, during the first of their four sessions that went into the making of 'Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad'. But that was not Plate's first encounter with Dr M.

Their acquaintance goes back a bit further, to at least January 1997 - in Hollywood, at the Beverly Hills Hotel, no less - where Dr M was making a pitch to the West Coast moneymen for the Multimedia Super Corridor. Plate had interviewed him for his Asia column in the Los Angeles Times.

Dr M had told Plate then that, "If you can't fight them, join them. That's why we're here."

In his book, Plate remembers his impression of Dr M as, "an entertaining synthesis of an Asian Lawrence of Arabia and a Muslim Shylock." And then: in late-1997, East Asia was plundered by currency speculators, Suharto fell to the IMF and World Bank, and Dr M narrowly avoided the same fate. He flayed George Soros, the "Jewish conspiracy", and coined the immortal phrase: "Foreigners jealous of our success."

And so, it boggles the mind, if only just a little, how it came to be that the foreigner, Tom Plate, albeit not Jewish, managed to wangle the time of day from Dr M. And not just once, but four times! Did he have access to Wikileaks documents that we should know about?

The truth is out there, but the answer is prosaic. It is because Plate has addressed the elephant in the room: the phenomenon of Dr M, the leader and the person, and not the red herring of Dr M, the legacy.

Which is to say, Plate has recognised the need to understand what informed the management methods of a man who governed a multiracial country for 22 years, during which there was no need to set up the Malaysian chapter of the Mothers of the Disappeared.

Written with American audience in mind

Plate is no socially mobile Malaysian citizen, and thus he is not complicit - or, at least acquiescent - in our subcontracting of democratic ideals and this country's governance to "Dr M and his cronies". We were his cronies when times were good and it was convenient to do so.

But the temper of our times has changed (and how). Given the revelations that have surfaced about Dr M and his administration - take the findings of the eminently ignored royal commission of inquiry into the VK Lingam Video Clip - it is tempting to dismiss Plate as hagiographer (more so than the book as hagiography, because the ad hominem argument is now the Malaysian way).

Conversations then becomes just another piece of the jigsaw that is the artfully crafted rehabilitation of Dr M and his legacy. This is to ascribe omniscience to a mortal. It is also revealing of the maturity of Malaysian democracy, because it shows a child-like and touching faith in the infallibility of our leaders, who are supposed to be everything that we aren't - and woe betide those who aren't.

Conversations was written with an American audience in mind, in an informal, deceptively readable, garrulous style. The author wanted to address Dr M's perceived anti-Semitism, and to present the (problematic) idea of a "moderate Muslim leader" to his primary audience. It draws a portrait of Dr M that those who have spent time in his company will recognise, whether attempting to elicit answers through Socratic dialogue or otherwise.

Rather be loved than feared

There are one or two historical glosses, such as in how Plate employs the term “ultra” to refer to Muslim extremists, and not to the racist politicians who have contributed in no small way to the increasing religious segregation of Malaysian society.

Nor is the related episode of Dr M's contribution to the sterling quality of Malaysian jurisprudence and syariah law dealt with directly; nor the abortive privatisation of public assets to fast-track the creation of a bumiputera capitalist and industrialist class. But that is another story.

Within its compact remit, the book's arguments are finely drawn, and it covers a breadth of topics that is insightful of why and how this country has arrived where it has, for better or for ill. Rather than attempt to establish the truth of the controversies during Dr M's leadership, the repartee between Plate and his interview subject casts a light on why certain decisions might have been taken.

Take this quote on Ops Lalang, famously picked up by Malaysiakini, and since enjoyed by all properly contentious but non-violent Malaysians: “I actually met all of the opposition members and assured them they would not be arrested. And you know what the police did? They arrested them. My credibility is gone ... You have to learn to live with the people with the guns.”

And here, also germane to the eruption in North Africa, is another: Plate poses Dr M the question of Machiavelli, the need for a leader to get his hands dirty; if evil means are justified by a good result. Dr M - who tells Plate that he would rather be loved than feared - looks puzzled, then says:

“Well, you have to struggle with such a question, but when you want to do something for the country, and you are opposed, well you can get evil thoughts - 'I wish that he'd be quiet' or 'I wish I could throw him in jail' and things like that. To me, that is evil. But it wasn't really necessary; I had to survive in a system that depends upon popularity.”

Cue discussion of democracy - and winning elections.

JASON TAN is the editor of Komunitikini and was master of ceremonies for the launch of this book, where he met Tom Plate for the first time. Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad is published by Marshall Cavendish Editions. This article first appeared in Harper's Bazaar.

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