

**Mahathir's thinking legacy**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**May 11, 2011**

A friend had lent me Mahathir Mohamad's memoir 'A Doctor in the House' to read. This was followed with the request for me to review it. I have read it but would decline his request for its review.

I have a reason for this refusal. It is that Barry Wain (the author of 'Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times') has already made one such authoritative and well-reasoned review in Malaysiakini (April 4, 2011). Any additional attempt on my part would be sheer duplication.

Instead I'd now highlight one major point raised by Wain in his review and use it to 'review' Mahathir's memoir.

It is that Wain claims that Mahathir has used facts mixed with fiction in his writing to become a mixture of both, a 'faction'. Wain cites the case of the construction of the North-South Expressway of a Mahathir faction and I quote:

“Mahathir claims that 'eventually a group of Malay contractors was persuaded to build and operate' the North-South Expressway. Actually, United Engineers (Malaysia) Bhd did not take much persuading. The company was controlled - secretly, for a time - by his Umno and given the contract to build the road and collect the tolls for 30 years to secure the ruling party's financial base.”

This revelation is very sobering, and I have noted too that Mahathir has used faction constantly during his tenure as prime minister.

I understand that faction is also known as a portmanteau. It is a familiar usage in English, like morphing or fusing 'smoke' and 'fog' to become smog, and 'stagnation' and 'inflation' to become stagflation.

I'd highlight another faction which occurred during Mahathir's time. It's the two words 'information' and 'entertainment' morphed to become 'infotainment'.

I am not aware whether it was Mahathir himself who introduced this fusion to the Malaysian domain. But during his time he made use of the mass media, especially radio and television, to disseminate government information while providing entertainment to the general public.

At first glance there is nothing wrong there.

But soon enough the word 'information' had become 'propaganda' when only good news (i.e. good things done by the government) were disseminated and highlighted while bad ones suppressed.

It did not end there. 'Government' morphed into the 'national ruling coalition' or 'political party', namely Barisan Nasional (and especially Umno).

When this happened the line between 'government' and 'political party' disappeared into thin air. Ever since then in this country 'government' has always been understood to mean 'Umno' and 'Barisan Nasional'.

### **Disappearance of the line of separation**

To wit, the disappearance of the line of separation between 'government' and 'Barisan Nasional' has resulted in the people becoming beholden to the whims and designs of the political bureau.

Infotainment has been used by the political leaders to hide their shortcomings, exaggerate their achievements, while moulding the thinking of the people to conform to party design. More than this, the ruling party has gained control of what the people can hear, read, say, see, and most importantly, think.

I am of the opinion that the Mahathir has not only introduced the principle of portmanteau to the Malay thinking domain but had used it constantly, regularly and effectively.

The result has been spectacular. There was the breaking down of the check-and-balance or the separation of power inherent in the democratic system. This was followed by the breaking down of the rule of law, the tampering with the democratic process and the elimination of the transparency, responsibility, and accountability in governance.

Since then civil servants lost their bearing, and instead of showing loyalty to the people they show deference to the political leaders. Indeed the public perception today is that even the AG's office, the MACC, and the police are beholden to political leaders but not to the national interest and people's well-being.

Now Mahathir is no longer in the party hierarchy but has left the principle of portmanteau very much alive in the minds of the Malay polity. Portmanteau might well be Mahathir's gift to the Malay intellect. It is practised even to this day!

To substantiate, let me highlight some 'products' of portmanteau gripping the country even now. As it is a product (i.e. the pattern of behaviour arising from the thinking) I have to introduce a new word, it being percefaction, morphed from the words 'perception', 'fact' and 'fiction' to label it; with thanks and deference to Wain.

In this case a perception is taken as fact, and this is then disseminated as the Quranic truth, i.e. the perception that everyone else has to subscribe to.

The country is now having a lot of percefactions, under the present Ketuanan Melayu leadership and management. I'd cite a few below examples to illustrate.

The first is the term 'Ketuanan Melayu' itself: just what does this mean and where does its legitimacy lie? Nobody seems to know but the Malays have absorbed it as a 'given' factor. To me it's a coinage that has captured the imagination of the Malay community who then resorts to it to suit their advantage.

Secondly it's the case of Ibrahim Ali of Perkasa. To him Malay 'privilege' (the word used in the constitution) is equitable with 'right'. So he has been protecting Malay rights while accusing non-Malays of wishing to deny him of this right.

Thirdly, this country is secular with Islam identified as the religion it is associated with. This has been the background and content of the constitution pertaining to religion. But percefaction does not stop bigots from believing and insisting it is the official religion. It did not stop Mahathir from proclaiming Malaysia as an Islamic country in 2001.

The fourth case is the case of Pembela, the Muslim organisation in defence of Islam. Pembela has noted that there has been a decline of Islam in this country. This is of course a debatable point. But Malay percefaction has blamed Christianity as one of the biggest contributing factors for this perceived decline.

Then there is the swearing on the Quran i.e. when a person resorts to swearing on the Islamic holy book to establish a truth when conventional means (like producing facts, evidence, witnesses) are dicey. The on-going Datuk T saga is a case in point.

### **Re-writing of history**

Next is the re-writing of history. This is when Malaysian history is re-written to get rid of unpalatable or non-existing Malay historical facts and replace them with myth, mystery and perhaps a bit of mysticism.

More tellingly, percefaction would tend to confuse the simple mind of the simple-minded Malay, as in the

Allah case. Here the Malay would just forbid non-Muslims from using 'Allah' to mean 'God'. To him the Islamic God is the One God Almighty, but in Christianity God comes in three forms, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. So when it is used by non-Muslims it confuses the Malay no end - and he hates to be confused!

There is a very long list of other perfections taking place in this country. How could this be happening?

This was made possible when Mahathir made use of one form of perfection - that 'might is right'. He has made himself as the moderniser of the country and saviour of the Malay people, and persuade, coerce and force the people believe this. Woe to those who'd disagree and rebel. His memoir is full of this double claim.

To ensure he gets what he wants a whole series of laws were either renewed or legislated, all designed to silence or eliminate dissent. The list is equally long and I'd just mention the ISA, the Sedition Act and the OSA as immediate examples.

I am of course not at all in favour of faction when abused in the manner illustrated above. When improperly used it tends to produce perfection. It's might is right supporting stance protects the abusers, and overtly and truly pulled the ignorant by the nose. Quran swearing is a perfect example of such abuse.

Moreover social indices during Mahathir's time would indicate the ills of perfection and its precursor faction. The country prospered, yes, but crime rate went up and corruption soared. The economy plunged, the people splintered with many running away to more hospitable countries, investments both foreign and local dried. The entire social fabric of the country has been shaken.

International indices like transparency, per capita income, education standards, and corruption were also plunging down.

All of this happening with the people blissfully believing they were under the good care of a most benevolent, caring, just, fair, and democratic government: the country's denial mode is rather spectacular, and for this I do not believe Mahathir's thinking legacy is good for the country.

With this I hope to have appeased my friend who has thoughtfully lent me Mahathir's memoir.