

Racial divide deepening, says Mahathir
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INTERVIEW Malaysian Chinese have stopped supporting the government because they no longer feel they are getting their share of projects, former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

The former prime minister looked back on his two decades in power in a May interview at his office in Putrajaya, the showcase administrative capital he built in the 1990s and one of the “mega-projects” that helped define his regime.

Chinese and Indians make up a third of the population but have become increasingly unhappy about an official policy that discriminates against them in favour of majority Malays.

“Yes, it's worse now,” Mahathir (left) says of the racial divide in Malaysia. “During my time, I could rely on Chinese support for my party. Now the government is threatened with losing Chinese support.”

He noted that his government two decades ago bowed to Chinese demands to have their own schools taught in the Chinese language, and said it showed how accommodating it was to minority races. “Despite having a national (Malay) language, they don't teach in the national language. They can't speak the national language.”

But he acknowledged that having separate schools had become a major factor in the racial divide.

“We would like them to come to national schools. We even suggested you can have your Chinese school, you can have your Tamil school, but why not put all three schools on one campus? So they can eat together, they can play together, and each gets to know that in the real world they have to interact with different races. But the Chinese say no. They say if you do that, we won't support the government.”

Mahathir also ensured Chinese support by doling out government contracts to them and their Malay partners, which critics said encouraged corruption and cronyism. Mahathir's successors shelved big projects to pare down a widening fiscal deficit, at the cost of Chinese votes, Mahathir said.

“For some reason or another, the moment I stepped down, all the projects were stopped ... When you stop big government projects, a lot of people, well, their businesses will go down.”

'Don't depend on foreign investment'

The man who made Malaysia part of the “East Asia Miracle” with a massive inflow of foreign direct investment doesn't think much of it today.

“We should not be too dependent on FDI any more. We've come to the stage when locals can invest. They have now the capital. They have the technology. They know the market. And I think they can manage big industries.”

Mahathir published an 809-page autobiography, 'A Doctor in the House', in March because he felt “the need to make corrections of the opinions and the accusations that were levelled at me”.

The accusation that grated the most, he said, was that he undermined the judiciary. The criticism is rooted in a 1988 amendment to the constitution that transferred powers over the judiciary to parliament. It essentially emasculated judicial independence, and allowed him to get judicial backing for his political manoeuvres from then onward.

Mahathir could not disguise his contempt for lawyers.

“A doctor wants to find out about the truth of his patients so he can identify a treatment. A lawyer wants to

get his client off the hook. And even if he knows the client is guilty he is going to find ways and means of getting him off the hook.”

- Reuters

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