

Perhaps not a dictator, but clearly an autocrat

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So, is anyone going to provide proof, like what former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad demands, that he is a dictator?

For my part in my Malaysiakini pieces, I have (sometimes) drawn interested readers to the fact that the rhetoric of the opposition often times is in conflict with the banality of the everyday reality of the systemic racial or religious discrimination that (and here is the important part) we, had a hand in creating. The unbearable truth is, it's not about you but us.

My piece on the former prime minister's bad medicine elicited brickbats here and elsewhere. I love the smell of abdication of personal responsibility in the morning. Smells like... victory.

Providing proof of tyranny does not necessarily make a dictator (not that I have used the term or maybe I have, like many I too have had my bellicose moments) in the populist sense of the word and would no doubt lead to relativist-tinged arguments with a base of solid pedantry.

Some like the term "dictator", I prefer "potentate" or "autocrat". These last two I believe more accurately describes the reality of the power-sharing formula espoused by Umno and the subservience of those of us who allowed such an arrangement to go on for decades.

For those of us who faithfully ticked 'opposition' on the ballot paper all those years, 'change' seems to be a fading ideal when it comes to any substantive principles that separate these two opposing forces. Yeah, I know, I know, federal power. We need federal power (sic).

Mahathir bid us a teary farewell and we embraced Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, wholeheartedly. Never mind that the same Umno message was presented to us by his handpicked successor.

Some of us bought into the fantasy that the Man was the problem and not the Machine. Of course, there were some of us who were shouting on the sidelines that there was (there always is) another alternative. We were ignored. Not surprising since Anwar Ibrahim had yet to discover his mojo.

I have no idea why Mahathir would offer himself up as a punching bag. Revisionist history aside by the Umno faithful, all this does is just wave a bigger red flag in front of the Pakatan Rakyat faithful. Old stories are regurgitated which remind us of why we need a change but do nothing (for our elected reps on either sides) to inspire any real meaningful departure from entrenched Umno dogma.

But Mahathir is right. He is not a dictator. Not like his good friend Robert Mugabe. Mugabe the self-described "black Hitler" who famously said that "Our votes must go together with our guns.

"After all, any vote we shall have shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer - its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins."

Yup, Mahathir is not in the same league as dictators like Mugabe or the rest he mentioned but the company he keeps is telling.

After all, isn't it the Malaysian way to point out that we are not as bad as "that country" or to compare ourselves to countries wracked with economic, social and territorial turmoil, sometimes all at once?

Selective memory

But since Mahathir bashing will always be welcomed in lieu of any collective reassessment of the role we as Malaysians played in the creation of the status quo (and by doing so, perhaps not replay the same game by keeping Pakatan honest) I, too will take a couple of shots of my own.

Mahathir's modus operandi of late has been to plead ignorance of the excesses that occurred during his watch but to claim credit for every so-called success of his regime. In other words, he has no problem taking the credit for "making Robert Kuok a tycoon" but rejects the claim that he destroyed Salleh Abas and the independence of judiciary.

Operation Lalang? The IGP's doing. You name it and Mahathir either pleads ignorance or shifts the blame to someone else. The hilarious thing is that plausible deniability is something that the higher echelons of power in this country don't have recourse to because greed and megalomania leave their wet dirty fingerprints everywhere.

The quote that begins this piece best describes the malfeasances of Mahathir and then of Umno and BN. All those unjust laws like the ISA which have destroyed hundreds of lives and cloaked us in fear for some time were not creations of Mahathir. He merely took them to their logical and unjust conclusion.

Look around us today and we are witness to how the same set of laws is applied differently depending on your allegiance to a specific political party. Enforcement arms of the government are as blatant in their prejudice as the propaganda organs of the BN.

Mahathir was selective in his use of laws to muzzle the judiciary and curtail the constitutional powers of the royalty. He clamped down on so-called Islamic extremism all the while carrying out a programme of Arabisation/Islamisation which decimated the civil and military service.

His was not the tyranny of bullets but rather the tyranny of ignorance.

Manipulate the education system so that successive generations would only be able to survive in a non-competitive environment like Malaysia. The fact that the non-Malays continued to thrive was cunningly used to play up to racial inadequacies and feelings of inferiority of the Malay 'majority'.

Keep the people separated by giving in to their communalist desires. Let the 'Malays' or whoever Umno defined as such be forever in need of the crutch of Umno benevolence and let the 'others' fight it out in the racist private sector, all the while establishing a rent-seeking culture sanctioned by the state.

We're part of the problem

The politics of patronage ensured that Umno would always have access to the Chinese-dominated business world and this in turn gave rise to the cronyists who became a class in their own right, the tendrils of their corruption wrecking havoc on the economic and social ecologies of Malaysia.

The ignorance Umno nurtured and the corruption they enabled is slowly but surely chipping away at their power. Umno encouraged a culture of mediocrity, which is why most voters either in Pakatan or BN partisans have such low expectations of their elected representatives.

At this critical time where there are numerous opportunities for the Malaysian public to challenge their preferred political parties intellectually, pushing them to the limits on how they intend to face the economic and social challenges that lie ahead, what voters want instead is for their elected reps to coddle them emotionally and appeal to their baser communalist desires.

And for Pakatan supporters, to tart it up in the multicultural/racial feel-good rhetoric which plays well to the urban demographic.

If the trains ran on time and our 'communal rights' were satisfied, nobody would be bothered about concepts such as 'ketuanan rakyat' or 'class-based solutions' to social problems or that cronyism or the politics of patronage existed. Like everything else here in Malaysia, it would have been 'tolerated'.

The possible downfall of BN is that they could not control their greed, not that their ideology was suspect or that people wanted something different from what they offered.

This is what the Mahathir years have wrought. A polarised electorate blind to the fact that in substance they are subscribing to the same ideology. One side fed up with the decades-long corruption of the current regime but unwilling to hold their preferred leaders to a higher standard (either in terms of principle or policy) in case the march to Putrajaya is disrupted.

The other side fearful that regime change would end their dependence on a system which they believe sustains their way of life, but in reality was designed to keep them down. If this sad state of affairs is not a crime, I don't know what is.

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