

How will history judge Mahathir?

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Some friends have asked me as to how history will remember former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad. This has led me to thinking about Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lee Kuan Yew and other Asian giants of colonial and post-colonial history, and how Mahathir measures up to them.

However, comparing him to other leaders in our Asian neighbourhood may be unfair to Mahathir as it may be demanding too high a standard in leadership, given the unusual and extraordinary crop of leaders in our part of the world.

Instead, I am now more inclined to compare him with leaders from other countries of the world where the comparison may be more appropriate.

One leader with whom I am sure Mahathir would not mind comparison is Kwame Nkrumah, a giant of contemporary African history whom Mahathir is probably hoping when his own obituary is written for future generations to put him in the company of.

Is Mahathir, who has borrowed the ideas (and the slogans) of Nkrumah and other leading post independence leaders worthy of such a comparison? Or does he belong to some other group?

Revisiting neo-colonialism

Some 40 years ago, when I was a younger man, Nkrumah who was president of Ghana (1960-66), coined the term neo-colonialism in his book 'Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism' (1965). In it he described the socio-economic and political control that can be exercised economically, linguistically, and culturally, whereby promotion of the culture of the neo-colonist country, facilitates the cultural assimilation of the colonised people, and thus opens the national economy to the multinational corporations of the neo-colonial country.

Although Nkrumah was an outstanding political leader who was the chief catalyst for his country's independence (he had a much rougher time from the colonial regime than most aspiring politicians and Mahathir ever had) many colleagues and I who lived through that turbulent post-colonial period were not sympathetic to his ideas on neo-colonialism.

While it may have had some validity in some post-colonial states, none of us ever thought that our country, Malaya then, was ever a neo-colonial or puppet state of the British or any other Western interest.

In the first place we had a successful transition from the colonial yoke to full independence without the kind of traumatic experience that some African countries went through. The legacy that Britain left in Malaysia was also a positive one.

As for me, I personally never felt beholden to the British in any way. In their relationship with me, my English friends were always respectful and they genuinely took pride in their positive contribution to our nationhood. When I had business dealings with the British following independence in the country, they were always honorable and kept their promises.

Of course this does not excuse the exploitation of the Malaysian economy during the colonial period by the British and their attempts at divide and rule to sustain their authority. But I find it troubling and unacceptable whenever our ultra-nationalists, including Mahathir - whenever it suits their agenda - to shift the blame for the problems of our economy and society to the machinations of foreigners and former colonial powers.

Borrowing from a distortion of Nkrumah's neo-colonial thesis, these 'patriots' see a foreign snake, hidden behind every bush and they will raise their voices audibly about this threat every time they need a distraction from their own domestic failings.

The most outstanding preacher of a dummy's version of an anti-neo-colonialism hero is Mahathir. Here is a man who has milked the foreign bogey - whether it is Britain, Australia, Singapore, the United States, Israel, Jews, the Green movement, the IMF, George Soros, etc - loudly and incessantly to serve his political interests and feed his ego.

Unlike most foreign analysts, I feel that it is not his crying wolf on neo-colonialism on so many occasions that Mahathir will best be remembered in history. Rather it is the cynical, divisive and racist ideology that first appeared in his Malay Dilemma book, which he has never renounced and which he has now revived in his twilight years.

It is also necessary to point out that although Mahathir is credited with the bold objectives of Vision 2020, he can be regarded as one of the main obstacles standing in the way of that vision. This is a subject I have covered extensively in my book 'Malaysia: Road Map to Achieving Vision 2020' which is available in most book shops.

Many Malaysians are now aware too of his adoption of the classic colonial strategy of 'divide and rule', a strategy designed to take us backward instead of forward.

The espousal of this discredited strategy stems from his frantic and desperate attempt to prevent the opposition from coming into power, and his greatest fear that a new Pakatan Rakyat government will uncover and expose all the dirty tricks and scandals of his era, thereby overturning the official and bloated version of the achievements of the Mahathir regime.

The two's opinions of their societies

Despite all of Nkrumah's failings, the African leader always thought highly of his people and nation, and sought the highest ideals for them. In one of his essays, Nkrumah wrote:

"We postulate each man to be an end in himself, not merely a means; and we accept the necessity of guaranteeing each man equal opportunities for his development.

"The implications of this for socio-political practice have to be worked out scientifically, and the necessary social and economic policies pursued with resolution.

"Any meaningful humanism must begin from egalitarianism and must lead to objectively chosen policies for safeguarding and sustaining egalitarianism." (1967 essay entitled "African Socialism Revisited").

In 2000, Nkrumah was voted Africa's man of the millennium by listeners to the BBC World Service.

Mahathir in contrast has had little respect or good to say of any of the communities that make up our society. He has always thought poorly of his own adopted Malay community and even worse of other long settled and assimilated non-Muslim communities. Witness not only his writings but also his recent playing of the 'immigrant' card to inflame Perkasa crowds against the Pakatan Rakyat and Anwar Ibrahim.

His focus on native Malay and Muslim rights and hegemony appears hypocritical since he has been the prime minister responsible for condoning no, encouraging - the largest wave of immigrant arrivals into the country in recent times. Witness also his latest attempts to prevent the transition of the country to a more democratic and less authoritarian one.

I think Mahathir will ultimately be remembered not for the quality of his leadership or the way in which he has sought to unlock the potential of all our citizens. He will certainly not be remembered for his standard of governance or the example he has set in arousing Malaysians to give their best to the country.

Rather he will most be remembered for his extraordinary long record of leadership in the country. It is a 22 year record of political opportunism and survival secured through appealing to the baser instincts of self-aggrandizement and greed and the manipulation of the major institutions of government.

This is why history will not judge him so kindly but will place him in the company of lesser and even failed leaders such as Ferdinand Marcos, Suharto and Robert Mugabe.