

## **End of the era of egomaniacal leaders?**

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**By Neil Khor**

COMMENT Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher died yesterday. Within minutes, Facebook and Twitter were buzzing. Almost everyone old enough to remember her when she was PM said in unison that her death was “the end of an era”.

Those who know of her only from the recent Academy Award-winning film based upon her life have also huddled irrationally together “to express their sympathy” for someone they have never met or even heard of until very recently.

This phenomenon of missing someone whom we do not know personally is a by-product of the influence of the mass media on our lives. Social networking has made this effect more pervasive, creating group identities.

This new situation means that leaders have to be celebrities to win elections.

That was why Najib Abdul Razak asked Malaysians whether we trusted him or Anwar. He was addressing young voters, who will decide if BN claws back its two-thirds majority.

The politician as celebrity started with Thatcher, one of the world’s most ‘constructed’ leaders. Her global image was as coiffured as her hair. Nothing was left to chance and there was no time to spare in her sprint to transform herself into a celebrity prime minister. The first woman British PM, she led the way with Barack Obama as her media savvy heir.

Thatcher did not have many admirers but she had many imitators. Imitation, as the British know so well, is the best form of flattery. In Malaysia, she wrote in her autobiography, “there was a man who said ‘buy British Last’, I let him host CHOGM and he never turned back”. No other Third World Leader learnt his lesson better than Malaysia’s Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Today, Mahathir is seen as the BN’s last great hope. He is campaigning for BN because he feels indebted to BN for all the years it has supported him.

Unlike so many other ingrates, Mahathir knows how to repay his debts. There is little doubt in the minds of most Malaysians that he continues to pull the levers in the BN. He can decide when a BN prime minister should step down and whom to elevate.

Mahathir modeled himself on the world leaders of his generation. This did not include nationalist leaders of the Third World but the ‘strong’ leaders of the West. Thatcher was one of them.

There is very little in the public domain about their relationship except for a little-known book about the Pergau Dam project. In it, the man who promoted ‘Buy British Last’, was

actively courting British arms manufacturers.

'All the world's a stage and we merely players', especially so when Mahathir launched the very public anti-British campaign while in private, British commercial interests proliferated.

Malaysia and Singapore remain the West's strongest allies in Southeast Asia. Mahathir's adroit handling of his public persona as the 'voice of the Third World' and his masterful facilitation of Western interests have ensured 'peace' for Malaysia.

Thatcher may have dismantled industrial Britain but Mahathir used FDI from the West to industrialise Malaysia. The reality is that Malaysia has remained 'safe' and secular under BN and especially during Mahathir's long administration.

He successfully kept the Islamists at bay. This is the "devil you know", so do you really want to take risks?

Mahathir's immense influence

As we await the countdown to GE13, many of the older generation will be looking back nostalgically to the time when we had a strong leader.

There was nothing silly that came out from the mouth of the PM like "the era of government knows best is over". There were no direct handouts, no need to massage the inflation figures and no ambiguity about the national vision.

There were no 'ifs' and 'buts' when implementing policy. If the press was pesky, we simply closed down the papers. If the royals went too far, we removed their immunity from prosecution. When the judiciary began to veer off course, we removed the Lord President.

And the PM led the BN to five electoral victory never losing its two-thirds majority because so many Malaysians voted for them. The PM was never more popular than the party.

Whilst both Thatcher and Mahathir rose above all their contemporaries to emerge as 'strong' leaders by mastering the media and cultivating an image as 'conviction politicians', enter the Internet and the rise of social media.

In the case of Mahathir, the social media was the tool he used to get his message across. He unseated his hand-picked successor by systematically demolishing Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (left), who will be forever remembered as the "sleeping PM".

Today, Mahathir is once again using his immense influence over the electorate to make sure the BN wins big in the coming GE. He said very clearly that the BN formula is the only one that works because Malaysians will never be mature enough to see beyond their own race and religion.

He celebrates Ibrahim Ali and Perkasa as custodians of the special Malaysian formula of

'Malay leadership' of a diverse multi-ethnic nation. He has made it clear that Selangor needs to be saved from another term of Pakatan Rakyat rule.

Some call this fear-mongering but it is a great pincer strategy. Whilst Najib is free to portray himself as cosmopolitan and a strong proponent of 1Malaysia, Mahathir appeals to the baser instincts of Malaysians at the lower end of the economic ladder.

Preying on their insecurities and the basic instinct to survive, he is indeed paying BN back for all the years the coalition has been of service to him. It was, after all the MCA and Gerakan, that saved him when Umno was declared illegal in 1988 and when the Malays abandoned Umno in 1999.

By supporting Perkasa and Ibrahim (left in photo), Mahathir has set the stage for the ultimate triumph of his worldview and his formula for Malaysia. Tunku Abdul Rahman recognised this cynical view and rejected Mahathir, dying outside of Umno and the coalition he fled.

The same with Hussein Onn, who preferred to join Semangat 46 that was led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. When Najib fails to obtain the two-thirds majority that he so confidently thinks he can get, Mahathir will be there to tell us that Malaysians have rejected 1Malaysia.

So, to those who want to see Thatcher's death as the end of an era - that is, the end of the era of divisive politics, of cynicism and of egomaniacal leaders - please think again.

It was the political philosopher Edmund Burke who said "those who have been intoxicated with power can never willingly abandon it". So it is with Mahathir and his quest to 'save' Malaysia, the Malaysia created in his own image.

It is now up to us to go to the polls and decide for ourselves whether it is truly the end of the Mahathir era!

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