

Dr M's unbearably convenient memory
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COMMENT Predictably, Dr Mahathir Mohamad cannot quite remember whether he was in the country when the Memali incident occurred in November 1985, four years and four months into his 22-year premiership.

His deputy then, Musa Hitam, said in Kota Baru last Thursday that Mahathir was in the country, not just when the incident occurred on Nov 19, but also up to four days after the episode in which 14 police personnel and four villagers were killed in Mukim Siong, Baling.

At that time, the Malaysian public was given to understand that their prime minister was abroad - in China, to be sure.

Mahathir held the customary press conference at the airport upon his return from abroad.

He took questions on the Memali incident in which police opened fire on a house where religious cult leader Ibrahim Libya was holed up with several villagers.

The ensuing shootout became a cause celebre.

Pressed for a response to what Musa had said about him being in the country during that incident and then affecting to show he was not, Mahathir parried his former deputy's implied attack on his probity with, "I can't remember."

Mahathir pleaded his advanced years (he will be 89 in July): "Since this happened a long time ago, I need to check back to see what he [Musa] said is true."

Mahathir has a convenient sense of recall: he remembers what it is expedient for him to remember and trots out pleas of amnesia when it suits his purpose.

At the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Lingam videotape in January 2008, Mahathir not infrequently responded with "I don't remember" to critical questions on his role in the matter in which a senior lawyer was captured on video attempting to fix the appointment of judges during the period of Mahathir's tenure as prime minister (1981-2003).

At that time Mahathir's infamous chiding of Malays - "Melayu mudah lupa" (The Malays easily forget) - for their supposed ingratitude came back to haunt him.

"Dr M mudah lupa," (Dr M easily forgets) became his critics' catch-phrase of raillery against him when it was seen that the former PM's powers of recall were conveniently self-serving.

Musa's motive

Political observers are wondering about the motive of Musa, a one-time ally-turned-opponent of Mahathir's in raising a matter that took place almost 29 years ago.

They ought to wonder no more: Musa is attempting a block. He knows Mahathir wants Prime Minister Najib Razak out as PM.

The incumbent PM is beleaguered by the disappearance of flight MH370, now three weeks into the greatest mystery in civil aviation's history.

The circumstances of the plane's mysterious disappearance with 239 people on board places Najib, Home Minister Zahid Hamidi and Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein on notice of grave lack of fitness to hold office.

Incidentally, all three of the abovementioned individuals are stalling points in the career path of Mukhriz, the Menteri Besar of Kedah, regarded as inheritor of the Mahathir mantle of national leadership.

In most countries in the world, North Korea excepting, an incident like MH370's disappearance would have had the trio of Najib, Zahid and Hishammuddin with their necks on the chopping block.

Not Malaysia where the 47 percent of the voters who endorsed the ruling BN coalition in the general election last May are embodiments of the validity of the philosopher George Santayana's dictum: "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it."

Command and control

Twice in the recent days Mahathir has talked about matters that bespeak a desire to return to a command and control role in Malaysian politics.

First, he advised that the government should get ready to tackle a financial crisis and trotted out his expertise at prescribing for just such a malady.

Days after this advice, analysts toted up expected losses to the economy from the suspension of the Visit Malaysia Year 2014 because of flight MH370's disappearance, and from the anticipated further bleeding of our already loss-hobbled national carrier, MAS. They said it would be RM4 billion at the very least.

The second alarum Mahathir sounded was even more unsettling. He said that if he were to return as PM, he would censor the Internet which would be a clear violation of the bill of rights he vouchsafed cyber practitioners when inaugurating the Malaysian Multimedia Corridor in 1996.

Well, no prizes for guessing what the former PM would say if reminded of his promise of no restrictions on freedom to publish on the internet: "I can't remember."

It has become a mantra of the man who had ruled the country for 22 years (1981-2003) during which he built it up physically and emasculated it morally.

The country's problem is that it has enough masochists who may want more of the same. Not Musa Hitam, though.

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