

## **Mahathir puts spanner in 'sedition' stakes**

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COMMENT In April 1982, days before the 6th general election, Mohd Asri Muda, the then PAS president, was asked about his assessment of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who had been in office as the fourth prime minister of the country some nine months.

Asri, himself a shrewd observer of political events and the people who shape them, offered the view that one could predict the behaviour and reaction of the first three prime ministers - Tunku Abdul Rahman, Abdul Razak Hussein, and Hussein Onn.

He said the new man at the helm of the country was going to be different from his predecessors in that he would not be predictable.

The PAS chief was speaking in the immediate aftermath of a rather startling development.

This was Mahathir's success at drawing Anwar Ibrahim away from the presidency of the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (Abim) into the ranks of Umno where he would begin as candidate for the Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency in Penang in the upcoming polls.

Prior to that enticement, it was said about Anwar that he was headed to be president of PAS and that was rumoured to be as early as when Asri, who was in his early 60s then, decided to quit.

Now, not only was the Penang-born Anwar going to join Umno, he was being tasked to prise a seat, whose incumbent was from PAS, away from the party he was soon supposed to head.

On the Richter scale of seismic political activity, this was a development that weighed in on the upper range.

Observer Asri had it spot on: the new man at the stern was going to revel in deploying surprises and a watching nation, oscillating between mild amusement and rude surprise, would want to take a good look at that inscrutable saying - "May you live in interesting times" - and perhaps contend that while it may be of Chinese provenance, it is decidedly Malaysian in relevance.

After having observed 22 years of Mahathir's premiership (1981-2003), not many pundits would quibble with Asri's early assessment of the man and fewer still would credit it to its source: Nicolo Machiavelli.

The 15th century Florentine political theorist recommended that a leader be unpredictable

so that the body politic is kept in a constant state of tension, the better to keep friends and foes at bay, and the chattering classes bemused.

By injecting a constant dose of tension via unpredictable action and pronouncement into political society, a leader creates the atmospherics for the working of his plan which, of course, no one save the person himself is privy to.

Shiftless and sleazy

Pray, what may Mahathir's purposes be in saying what he has just said about the Malays and that, too, in the present circumstances of the country where the term 'sedition' has taken on a voltage that 'apostasy' in religion-obsessed societies has had or the term 'Red' once had in the days when communism was a bogey?

By decrying Malays as shiftless and sleazy at a time when race and religion are matters of feverish gravity, is he challenging the authorities to charge him with sedition?

In the present situation, given what he has said, he is more liable to be charged on that count than others who are currently being probed and charged, and who have said things that could only savour of sedition.

In other words, sedition, unlike beauty, does not reside in the eye of the beholder; they have to have insurrectionary intent before words can be determined to be seditious.

Mahathir's latest castigations of the Malays are provocative, not incendiary.

They are nothing new: he has said almost the same things in his book 'The Malay Dilemma' that earned him a book ban and expulsion from Umno in the early 1970s.

To be sure, the arguments in his book that Malays lacked the genetic endowment and cultural environment to progress as a people were cogently rebutted in 'Siapakah Yang Salah' (Who is at Fault), a little known disquisition by Syed Hussein Alatas, the academician who headed Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia formed in 1968.

But Malaysian political discourse has favoured sensation more than sensibility, in keeping with a bias that the level of the national conversation be no higher than that set by the ruling mediocrities.

If the latter decline to indict Mahathir for sedition for saying what he has just been quoted as saying, would they be crass enough to persist with the sedition probes and charges filed against a hapless slew of the already investigated and charged?

If they do persist, they would confirm former attorney-general Abu Talib Othman's view that the sedition fever presently taking hold of the authorities is not "prosecution" of the offence; it is, said the ex-AG, more like a "persecution".

As for the people offended by what Mahathir has said about the Malays, they would be more constructively advised to advert to 'Siapakah Yang Salah', a slender but solid bit of reasoning which may leave them wondering how proponents of the more erudite arguments about race and economic progress lost out to espousers of the facile and the false in debates of great moment in this country four decades ago.

That defeat set the stage for our present intellectual debilitation. No politician has capitalised on this more than Mahathir Mohamad.

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