

Confession of a former admirer of Dr Mahathir
MalaysiaKini.com
Nov 29th, 2016
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COMMENT The advocacy and participation of Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the recently-concluded Bersih 5 was a moment for the Malaysian history books.

Once a huge detractor of street rallies - deeming them as undemocratic and unlawful, he took to the streets during Bersih 5, urging the removal of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

The detention of Maria Chin Abdullah under Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (Sosma) on the eve of the rally was highly condemned by Mahathir. Attending the [candlelight vigil](#) at Dataran Merdeka, he chanted "Bebas Maria" in a show of solidarity and support.

Perhaps the fact that he had Yunus Ali, Maria's husband, arrested and detained under Internal Security Act (ISA) during 'Operasi Lalang' had become a thing of the distant past in his mind. The current administration's treatment of Maria, who posed no threat whatsoever to national security, was no different from Mahathir's treatment of the people he had arrested in 1987.

The irony would be funny, if it wasn't painful.

I was an admirer of Mahathir. To be honest, perhaps the word "admirer" is actually an understatement. Mahathir was my hero, my idol, my aspiration to be a better person and to perform great deeds.

To the young teenager I was then, whose only source of information came from the mainstream media, Mahathir cut across as a powerful and brilliant leader, stamping his authority in the arena of world politics.

I saw him as the integral figure in advancing Malaysia's economy, by shifting the country's economy away from the agriculture and natural resources sector, and towards manufacturing and exporting.

The KL International Airport and the Petronas Twin Towers were built during his administration, putting Malaysia on the map as a rising economic power on its way to greatness.

I marvelled at Mahathir's disdain for the Western/Anglo-Saxon powers, I cheered at his refusal to submit to the International Monetary Fund during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. I deemed him a hero when he pegged the ringgit against the US dollar, and was convinced that the strict capital controls he introduced were for the good of the country.

And of course, I believed everything Mahathir said about his then-deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, and I believed every single accusation laid against Anwar - corruption, sodomy, everything.

I spent my teenage years worshipping Mahathir, due to my own lack of knowledge, and my inability to rationalise beyond what I have been told. The country's mainstream media was - and still is - an effective propaganda machine for the government, and I did not realise how severe was the crackdown against opposing views.

Designed to eliminate political rivals

My political awakening against Mahathir - if you could call it that - came when I went for further studies overseas. Taking a political science class and tasked with an assignment on portraying democracy and freedom of speech in Malaysia, I embarked on research, enthusiastically thinking I'll paint Malaysia as a completely democratic nation with great leaders at the helm.

I was wrong.

Malaysia, democracy and freedom of speech. The first thing I came across that dismantled all of that was 'Operasi Lalang'. I had always believed 'Operasi Lalang' to be an operation that was unfortunately necessary for the reasons of maintaining national security.

But of course, it was not so. It was an operation designed to eliminate Mahathir's political rivals, both internally and externally, and to curtail civil and fundamental liberties, only to ensure the beginning of Mahathir's authoritarian regime.

There was no notion of democracy or freedom, as newspapers lost their press freedom and from then on were subjected to immense censorship under the so-called advice of the Home Ministry. Politicians, NGO activists and academicians were arrested and detained without trial under the draconian ISA.

All that, just so that Mahathir could solidify his position of power.

Malaysia's democracy was further eroded with the 1988 constitutional crisis, when Mahathir removed the power of the High Court to conduct judicial review, and then subsequently sacked the Supreme Court judges, hence bringing the independence of the country's judiciary to an end.

And of course, the realisation that Mahathir was the champion of cronyism, crony capitalism, corruption and nepotism in his years of administration.

In some sense, it was like a child finding out that Santa Claus isn't real.

It was disconcerting to find out that I had been living in the house of mirrors where Mahathir was concerned, that everything I thought I knew were grossly distorted versions of reality.

But it was a realisation that nothing can be taken for granted, and that the truth was, more

often than not, layered – and to know the truth, to understand the complete picture, one must always question what they think they know.

With Mahathir's current revival as “the good guy” in his fight against the current Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak - also known as 'Malaysian Official 1' - it seems almost easy to forgive Mahathir for all that he has done, especially now that he stands on the “righteous” side.

He is now speaking out against injustice, against undemocratic actions, against corruption, and he is advocating for freedom of speech and for the right to assemble.

At least he's doing something. At least he's trying to right his wrongs. At least he's trying to save this country. These are the thoughts and opinions that are prevalent right now, even among those who had directly suffered under his government and his policies, namely, the politicians of the opposition parties.

Little spoken on clean, fair elections

Has Mahathir truly reformed? Is he really acknowledging his past transgressions and making genuine attempts at atonement? Or is he merely obsessed with eliminating Najib?

It is interesting to note that he has spoken little on clean and fair elections, and of institutional reforms, but instead repeatedly stressed that the current government needs to be replaced with the opposition coalition that he is now part of.

I have been hoodwinked once. Therefore, at some level, it is very difficult for me to believe that Mahathir truly wants to save Malaysia.

The situation of Malaysia now bears the fruit of the tree that Mahathir had planted since the beginning of his regime.

Malaysia is indeed in dire straits if we're looking to the man who is the father of this mess to play a role in saving us. But the stark reality remains that Najib is still firmly established in power, empowered by money politics, and Mahathir is a man that could, just perhaps, tip that balance a little.

Reflecting on his support for Maria, it is almost satirical, knowing that she is someone who would be the bane of the old Mahathir's existence. Maria is a strong, vocal woman who will speak out against all the wrongdoings she sees.

She fights courageously for freedom, for equality, for the right to dissent, for Malaysians to have the right to clean and fair elections as well as a transparent government. And she does not, and will not yield to corrupt powers that are currently doing their best to make her submit.

One will hope that Mahathir's current strong advocacy for the release of Maria, a beacon and a symbol in the fight for freedom and rights, would also represent a true desire of his to see that the country will adopt the institutional and democratic reforms that it so

desperately needs.

I want to remain hopeful. I want to think that this despotic, tyrannical leader can actually be motivated to do more good for the betterment of the country. But it is very difficult for me to look past his past transgressions.

If Mahathir is to want the nation's forgiveness, he must truly advocate for institutional reforms in ensuring fair elections and a clean government - basically going against everything he once stood for. And that would only be a start.

As for my own personal stance on Mahathir, I am very well aware that political and economic turmoil that Malaysia is undergoing today is hugely because of him, his politics and his policies. That, I will never forget.

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