

LETTER | Has Mahathir blown his chance at redemption?

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Lau Chee Hong

LETTER | A recent article on Harith Iskander's interview with Mahathir drew mostly brickbats for this nonagenarian. Commentators were mostly dismissive, labelling him "racist", "untrustworthy", "outdated" and "irrelevant". Many implored that we "forget him". A few even chided host Harith for inviting him on his show.

But many who now lament his political treachery had once seen him as the saviour to the country's then crisis of confidence. I was certainly one of them.

A little over three years ago, many Malaysians had yearned for a Pakatan Harapan victory in the 2018 general election. Signs leading up to the elections were all good.

Mahathir had reconciled with his previous political enemies (Anwar Ibrahim, DAP, Bersih, etc). His then small and yet unregistered Malay-only party joined the

Pakatan Harapan coalition to battle BN. Speedy resolution of seat allocations to avoid vote-splitting was a big factor in Harapan's victory.

The swearing-in of Mahathir as the seventh prime minister was heralded with great joy and gave much hope for a Malaysia Baru. Many were convinced the good doctor had returned from retirement to right all the wrongs of the previous BN government.

A few weeks later, he announced the most inclusive cabinet in decades and filled key government appointments with people of credible integrity and competence, including numerable non-Malays, eye-brows were raised but the good doctor seemed undeterred. He even promised to ratify all anti-discrimination UN conventions, though he later backtracked on this under pressure.

In the first year under his leadership, Harapan convincingly won most, if not all, state and federal seat by-elections.

For a while, it seemed Mahathir would be leaving a legacy that many Malaysians had hoped he would.

After all, he is one who was not afraid to break the glass ceiling. During his years as the fourth prime minister he had regularly chided Malays for their poor work

ethics, taken on the royals and sacked a top judge. If there was anyone who dared to take extraordinary steps to “make Malaysia great again”, many thought it had to be him.

Then things started becoming undone.

Mahathir began reverting to his 'old ways'. His attempts to restart pet projects shelved by his successors were early signs. U-turns on resizing or cancelling controversial mega dollar projects committed by Najib’s government were another sign.

When then minister Yeo Bee Yin tried to impose tough but necessary waste management requirements on the Lynas plant, Mahathir wanted her sacked.

After Harapan supporters became impatient and complained about the lack of progress on much-needed reforms, he brashly claimed that Harapan’s election manifesto was infeasible, and that he did not think Harapan could win GE14.

This was not his only foot-in-the-mouth mea culpa, but one most people will remember for a while.

For non-Malays, his continued refusal to deport Indian fugitive Zakir Naik, and

his participation in the October 2019 Malay National Dignity Congress were perhaps the last straws.

But even before then the tide had reversed and a reconstituted BN-PAS opposition had started to win several by-elections in a row.

Characteristically unrepentant, Mahathir did not accept any responsibility for Harapan's change in fortunes.

Ultimately, following the Sheraton Move in February 2020, the Harapan government was ejected from Putrajaya.

During a radio talk show early this year, host Noelle Lim pointedly asked Mahathir what he hoped was his legacy. He replied he does not care about his legacy. The man who wrote "A doctor in the House" touting his achievements during his PM years does care about his legacy? Really?

To me, Mahathir is an enigma. He had the smarts. He had the guts. He had the energy. He was in public office longer than any other politician.

Arguably, the best and the worst of times for this country will forever be associated with him.

When given the unique opportunity to navigate the country onto a different course from the one the country was on before GE14, he chose to maintain course, that is, protect the status quo for Malay elites at all costs.

As he himself admitted, time is now not on his side. I fear he had missed his one-time opportunity at redemption.

History will not be kind to this man.

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