

The two sides of Mahathir Mohamad
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It is a case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde - or more aptly Dr M and Mr Mahathir - when it comes to Malaysia's fourth prime minister, said 'Malaysian Maverick' author Barry Wain.

mahathir pc on bar council 191208 02A "talented politician", Mahathir had compartmentalised his life, and adopted a completely different rule book for politics, Wain told Malaysiakini in an exclusive interview yesterday.

Through his conversations with Mahathir's (left) family, the author said, he found that outside of politics, Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister was in fact an upright family man.

"He taught his children right from wrong, how to work hard, no short cuts to success, good manners and respect for authority.

"(But) how do you square that with dumping someone in prison under the Internal Security Act for getting in your way politically?" asked the seasoned journalist, who had followed Mahathir's political career since the 1970s.

ahmad mustapha book launch by musa hitam 141107He added that former deputy premier Musa Hitam (right) explained it best: "(With Mahathir it is the case of) 'You can be my friend today, but tomorrow morning, you could be my mortal enemy.'"

In Kuala Lumpur to promote his best-seller that will also be translated into Bahasa Malaysia, Wain admitted that he found the politician's ability to keep aspects of his life separate "extraordinary".

In fact, he was taken aback to find that Mahathir's wife Dr Siti Hasmah only learnt that her husband wrote a highly critical letter to then premier Tunku Abdul Rahman in the wake of the May 13, 1969 riots only after it had been mailed.

"Even when he wrote (that letter), he probably expected that the Tunku would put him in jail, he didn't even bother telling his wife," he said.

Did Dr M neglect rural Malays?

Wain felt that Mahathir was so hell-bent on pushing Malaysia up the development scale that he would stop at nothing to fulfill his dream.

"He didn't do enough to correct abuses in the New Economic Policy, corruption in Umno ... he undermined institutions ... he wasn't going to be thwarted by independent courts ruling (in a) way," he said.

ku li tengku razaleigh interview 241106 significantIt was this determination which led Wain to believe that he would have found a way to remain in power even if he had lost to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (left) at the 1987 Umno General Assembly.

"When (Mahathir) was defending the sacking of the (Supreme Court Lord President Salleh Abas), he said that he didn't have to worry about sacking the chief justice or stacking the

odds because (he) would have found another way.

"You are left with the impression that he was so determined in his political career that it would be almost impossible to cut him out in any way," he said of the string of events which many believe had heavily influenced Malaysia's political landscape.

In his book, Wain said that Mahathir may have had a hand in the sacking of Salleh Abas who was expected to find in favour of Razaleigh in the court appeal which followed the election.

While powering through at all costs, Wain observed, Mahathir had to an extent "neglected" the rural Malays, whom he had championed early in his political career.

Instead, he chose to back the new Malay elite - a breed of nouveau riche Malays who benefitted from the bumiputera-friendly affirmative action.

"I think he genuinely forgot about (the rural Malays, living mostly in poverty)... there was no room for Malay smallholders, farmers, fishermen (in his vision of Malaysia).

"When I discussed this point with (Musa) - but I did not discuss it in the book - he told me that he used to remind Mahathir that the poor Malays were being left behind.

"(But Mahathir) pitched his sights far afield and in the great scheme of things (the rural Malays) did not fit into his ambitions," he said.

Death grip on PM's post

Wain added that Mahathir was entirely consumed by his vision for Malaysia, that it occasionally brought him to tears - an act which his detractors dismissed as mere theatrics.

"I didn't think he was acting at all. He was in tears because he was genuinely overcome with emotion," he said.

But for all his clarity of vision where the future of the nation was concerned, Wain said, Mahathir could not foresee that his chosen successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would be "a disaster as a prime minister".

"(Mahathir told me) 'I didn't know (Abdullah) was going to turn out like that. The Americans didn't know George (W) Bush was going to be like that," he said.

He added that it was probably Mahathir's death grip of the prime ministerial post that blocked talented potential successors out of the leadership pipeline.

Those who have followed Mahathir's colourful career closely, he said, should not be surprised that the octogenarian is still so vocal in his retirement, although the real motives is anyone's guess.

Wain said that while he vowed not to interfere after stepping down, Abdullah's faltering leadership was likely to be what forced the former premier to butt in.

"najib mahathir pak lah umno 2009 agm final day 280309 02Somewhere along the line I guess (Mahathir) expected Abdullah to follow what he prescribed... he had no doubt whatsoever that his way is the right way.

"But there is definitely an element where he really craves the limelight and he finds it hard to be ignored (which motivated him to) sometimes to write some extreme things on his blog," he said, adding that he does not buy that Mahathir believes that the Sept 11 tragedy was staged.

And by lending support to Malay rights' group Perkasa, Wain said, the 'maverick' appears to have "gone full circle" - returning to the early days of his career when he was the firebrand champion of the Malays.

Asked if he has set his sights on another Malaysian politician, Wain said, "Probably (Opposition Leader) Anwar Ibrahim, but only if he becomes prime minister.

"Mahathir and Anwar are probably the two most talented politicians Malaysia has seen in the last decades," he said.

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