

Dr M - an unlikely minority rights defender
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Skeptics are not likely to be disarmed by Dr Mahathir Mohamad's newfangled solicitude for non-Muslim rights as suggested by his defence of the right of the Chinese to gamble.

Few among them would hasten to laud him for his concern that the rights of minorities be upheld in a country where gambling is taboo for the majority Muslims.

Fewer still would be moved to induct him into a hall of fame for defenders of minority rights for speaking up for the right to wager on something as seemingly innocuous as the results of soccer matches.

On the contrary, critics are more likely to be amused by the extent he is prepared to go to secure a crony's advantage: no Umno president has been less abashed about the nexus between business and politics than Malaysia's fourth prime minister.

vincent tan sports bettingBerjaya's Vincent Tan, the chief beneficiary should sports betting be legalised, is stellar member of a coterie of businessmen who have benefitted by being friends of Mahathir while he was prime minister.

Though the pejorative 'crony capitalism' came into vogue in the waning years of president Suharto, it was given additional ballast by his contemporary across the Strait of Malacca.

This may not all be oxymoronic except that few leaders have been as comparably and as frequently caustic about a whole lot of the disreputable who have sold out on race and religion for filthy lucre.

Mahathir's gymnastic flexibility

Mahathir's defence of the right of the Chinese to gamble is only the latest demonstration of his willingness to take positions that can be diametrically opposite the ones he took in a long career of gymnastic flexibility.

He was the first PM to unilaterally, without consultation with coalition partners, declare Malaysia an Islamic state which he did in September 2001.

Also, on his watch in 1988, a constitutional amendment was passed placing syariah courts on par with the civil jurisdiction.

That amendment and the later pronouncement left the position that Malaysia is a secular polity gravely weakened, though jurisprudence had already congealed around the position that the constitution, despite a doffing of the hat to Islam as the official religion, favoured secularity.

People who will say anything are often the victims of diminished self-esteem. Assuredly, that is not the problem with Mahathir.

Scribes have sought many tropes to explain the man - the most recent being Barry Wain - but in vain.

In one of the stories of the great Latin American fabulist, Jorge Louis Borges, the hero observes that there is nothing more unnerving than a centreless labyrinth. Mahathir is like that labyrinth.

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