



Stark irony in Mahathir's diatribe
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COMMENT One way of knowing how close Pakatan Rakyat is to its goal of making Putrajaya is to see what that does to its chief nemesis: Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Just now he is driven to say the most outlandish things, that if Pakatan wins the fast approaching general election the Malays would lose power and that a Chinese or an Indian could become prime minister –

all this while taking care to emphasise he is not racist.

Dr Goebbels, the Nazi chief propagandist, said that if you repeat a lie umpteen times it can stick. Dr Mahathir must believe in this theory of repeated iteration, otherwise he wouldn't so often issue racist statements accompanied by disavowals of intent.

People who will say anything are often the victims of diminished self-esteem. But a paucity of self-esteem cannot be the former prime minister's problem.

Only someone with his bloated sense of self-importance would say anything to get himself out of a spot, confident his high standing would withstand meltdown from perceived asininity.

Those with the privilege of the public ear are obliged to take intellectual standards seriously. When the arena for the extension of that privilege is a university out to confer an honorary doctorate, the recipient is duty bound to avoid suggesting that the life of the mind is the life of the spleen.

Against the West, Mahathir's bile - of which he has a large natural endowment, augmented by a peculiar combination ego and insecurity - is well documented.

It's not difficult to discern why: he's a reflexive autocrat who dislikes the contra autocracy ideas that emanated from the West's experiment of the last three centuries in democratic governance.

Hence Mahathir fulminates against the West most chances he gets.

"Without you knowing, the world is having moral, social, political and economic crises because they are too tied up and bound by the goals and philosophies derived from Western theories," Mahathir yesterday told his audience at the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (Usim) which conferred on him an honorary doctorate.

Presumably, politeness would have prevented members of his audience from admonishing the speaker: "Physician, heal thyself."

It appears only Mahathir does not seem to know that the moral, social, political and economic crises plaguing the Malaysia he governed for 22 years is partly due to his departure from theories of democratic governance emanating from the West at which he has frequently looked askance.

There is considerable irony in this.

Disciple of Machiavelli

Of him one cannot say "without [him] knowing it" - because he is enough read a man - that while Mahathir decries the liberal thrust of western philosophy, he has been a sedulous practitioner of the political statecraft of Nicolo Machiavelli and the weltanschauung of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The theory that a political leader needs the strength of a lion and the cunning of a fox to prevail is not something close observers of Mahathir's prime ministerial tenure can say he does not instinctively understand, which political scientist Machiavelli held was of paramount importance if a ruler desired to succeed.

Further, looking at Mahathir's discipline, his capacity for work and to overcome pressure, his indomitability in crisis, his unconcern for the rules of others even as he makes his own, his ability to espouse today something as true that he yesterday doubted or held as false, recalls Nietzsche's transvaluation of values, the mark of the 'superman' that the German philosopher counseled one must become if one wants to separate oneself from the run of humanity.

The problem about both Machiavelli and Nietzsche is that their thought marked a sharp reactionary turn in the general liberal trend of western thought from Hellenic times till now.

Herein the irony: that while lambasting the West, Mahathir's political craft and worldview takes its inspiration from two thinkers from the West whose thought marked a sharp departure from their predecessors'.

Machiavelli, in the 15th century, theorised as a pagan nihilist in a time when the Italian states were Christian polities whose rulers shuddered before the deity if their means did not justify their ends.

Nietzsche, after Darwin had in the middle of the 19th century persuasively suggested that man had evolved from matter, philosophized against a backdrop proclaiming the death of God.

However, Mahathir is not entirely without grounds when he speculates that what is wrong about western philosophy is its godless cosmogony. Few, save Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking and their ilk, can be imperturbable before the notion that human life is a brief flare of consciousness before two eternities of oblivion - which is the atheist position.

Ruler need not worry?

But Mahathir's latching on to presumed weaknesses in western philosophy is not motivated by a disinterested contemplation of truth - incidentally, the *raison de'tre* of universities.

Instead, it is prompted by worry that mounting public consciousness in Malaysia that rights have been abused and that the biggest abuser, Umno-BN, is being shoved by the currents of public opinion into the dock for a much delayed reckoning.

That looming possibility bodes ill for Mahathir Mohamad.

Machiavelli was not necessarily right: that a ruler need not worry about the means which he employs to secure his ends because the public is generally seduced by successful outcomes

and bother little, after-the-fact, about the means it took to attain those ends.

As to an afterlife where a ruler needs to account for his conduct before the deity - well, the pagan nihilist contended, don't worry such a deity simply did not exist.

If Pakatan wins the 13th general election, the first part of Machiavelli's theory is likely to be proven untrue, as far as Mahathir will be concerned. In that event, longevity may not necessarily be a blessing.

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