

**Best for Dr M to go gently into the night**  
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**Din Merican**

Dr Mahathir Mohamad has done it again – shot off his mouth and shot himself in the foot. This time he has not just done it in the pages of a local newspaper by way of written response to a senior lawyer's strictures; he has gone and done it on the air.  
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On BBC's 'Hardtalk' no less. You didn't need to hear Mahathir's rant on 'Hardtalk' to be convinced that this octogenarian just won't go gently into the night. A quiet retirement was never on the cards, despite the man's initial disavowal of interest to take part in national affairs and gravitation to the ethereal stature reserved in Malaysia for former prime ministers.

Mahathir is going to rage and rant against the newly begun internment of his legacy as PM. He would do that not with substantive arguments for why his legacy should be kept alive, but by pouring diversionary drivel on his pet peeves – the West, democracy, Zionists - a favoured tactic when his back is against the wall.

Small wonder he goes to such lengths to denounce the West. When the currency and stock market crisis hit East Asia in mid-1997, Mahathir's response was to blame Jewish currency speculator George Soros. When Anwar Ibrahim helped guide disgruntled voters towards a denial of a two-third majority for Barisan Nasional in Parliament, Mahathir segued from chiding Anwar for daydreaming that he could become prime minister to chastisement of his nemesis for alleged suitability to become PM of Israel.

For all his laments about the tendency of Muslims to believe slavishly what they are told by benighted ulama, Mahathir is an unabashed subscriber to Zionist conspiracy theories which hold that Jews are adept at using non-Jews to achieve their nefarious designs.

Mahathir's weakness for non-sequiturs is transparent when it comes to the issue of democracy. He is only in favour of it when it confirms his opinions and his hold on power. Otherwise it is a Western corruption designed to weaken the grip of enlightened authoritarians, like himself, on their grateful wards. There is no way that Mahathir would cite democracy favourably for its suitability in removing a tyrant like Robert Mugabe, incidentally a valued friend of Mahathir's.

The truth-quotient in Mahathir's claim on 'Hardtalk' that Anglo-Saxon Europeans are historic purveyors of war, slavery and the Holocaust is comparable to that in the claim that in Malaysia, rampant corruption, a weakened police force and a lumbering civil service are the effects of Barisan Nasional's misbegotten rule.

A more discriminating interlocutor would hold that when Plato observed that 'only the dead have seen the end of war', he was adverting to a universal, not specifically Anglo-Saxon's reality; that the scourge of slavery flourished just as much because there were willing Anglo-Saxon buyers of human chattel as there were ready West African sellers; and that the Holocaust's roots owed to the Superman theory of the German thinker Nietzsche (ironically, no anti-Semite himself) that was given a perverse twist by the demented Adolf Hitler.

A Malaysian critic with a comparable feel for nuances may hold that the pervasive corruption

of recent times, the dysfunctional police force and an ineffectual civil service were the corrosive effects of Mahathir's prolonged tenancy of the office of Umno president, prime minister and home minister than it was specifically due to Barisan Nasional misdeeds, though a degree of negligence is attributable to the latter for the maladies besetting the country.

The legacy of Mahathir is under grave threat in Malaysia, as witness the move to rescue Salleh Abas from judicial disgrace, the attempt to create a judicial commission to select and promote judges, and the momentum towards giving the Anti-Corruption Agency an independent existence. These measures are full of menace to Mahathir's legacy, built on brazen actions and justified on spurious grounds.

A leader of Nietzsche's worldview and Machiavellian strategy is discovering that such a philosophy allied to the statecraft recommended by the author of *The Prince* is serviceable while power is retained in one's hands. But when the centre of political gravity shifts out of one's ambit of control, even genuine achievements – like building the North South Highway during a time of recession, and embracing the IT world – can turn hazy.

In a time when his legacy is beginning to come apart at the seams, it's best for Mahathir to go gently into the night, to resist the temptation to rage against inevitable shifts in critical fashion, and instead stake all on preserving his few genuine achievements that should resist time's passage and wear well in posterity's judgement.

'Cast a cold eye on life/On death/Horseman pass by.' Yeats' suggestion of a fitting epitaph should suffice for the cold existentialist Mahathir Mohamad.

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