

Dr M pressing self-destruct button?
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analysis
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Most retired politicians who are more than 80 years old would probably live wisely, following a lifestyle of simplicity. Freeing the heart of hate. Freeing the mind of worry. Giving more, expecting less.

But Malaysia's fourth prime minister's voice continues to rumble like prolonged thunder, like an endless storm.

mahathir interview 050308Called the 'Father of Modern Malaysia', Dr Mahathir Mohamad appears to be pressing his self-destruct button - it could destroy what remains of his 22-year legacy, including the respect and goodwill that he has in the hearts of many Malaysians.

His character was shaped by his strict upbringing by a conservative father and school teacher, Mohamad Iskandar, and also by his experiences during the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

"His father nurtured his enquiring mind, encouraging him to think for himself and to speak out," says a reference to Mahathir's simple beginnings in the 'Encyclopedia of Malaysia'.

Hence, it is of no surprise that Mahathir is considered by far the most vocal prime minister the nation has had.

Many are also familiar with his bitter experiences at an early age. The Japanese invasion during World War II interrupted his schooling for three years. He had to run a stall selling fried bananas in Pekan Rabu, Alor Setar.

He entered politics covertly during his schooldays, sneaking out at night to post pamphlets opposing the Malayan Union. He became one of the youngest members of Umno when it was inaugurated on May 11, 1946.

Mahathir graduated in 1953 with a medical degree from University of Malaya in Singapore and set up practice. Many patients called him Dr Umno.

His political career was marked by expulsion from the party in 1969, but he was invited back in March 1972. At the age of 55, he became prime minister.

At the peak of his popularity, he was described by Third World nations as a "truly global statesman".

good bye malaysia mahathirHowever, there has been a dark side to his administration. Many Malaysians now have serious misgivings from his 'politics of patronage'.

Many serious ailments and negative characteristics have since been passed down to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - among these, oppressive laws, dictatorial policies, corruption in the civil service and judiciary, abuse of power.

Sense of outrage

Mahathir was almost treated like a celebrity immediately after he retired in November 2003 as prime minister and Umno president. But he did not stay out of sight for too long.

He returned to 'active politics' in June 2006, initiating his first volley of political attacks against Abdullah. Critics accused him of fomenting the very institution he had spearheaded.

If 'egotism' is defined as the art of seeing in oneself what others cannot see, then Mahathir has indeed caused much bewilderment among Malaysians in relation to his behaviour. Many formerly loyal and subservient cabinet ministers whom he groomed and promoted have abandoned him in disillusionment or betrayal.

The tears shed and emotional sadness among rank-and-file Umno members when he stepped down, is now either sublimated by political fatigue or subjugated by a sense of outrage.

Wanita Umno chief Rafidah Aziz responding to Mahathir's resignation from the party, reportedly said: "I'm shocked and disappointed because Dr Mahathir seems to be punishing Umno over issues he is dissatisfied with. Don't use the party as a hostage to achieve what you want."

To ordinary Malaysians, Mahathir's 'impromptu' resignation from Umno is seen as a desperate act to force Abdullah to step down. Few party leaders and members have emulated Mahathir's move.

More damaging in the eyes of Malaysians has been his recent ploy, which is perceived as playing the racial card to further his selfish interests.

Mahathir claimed: "The Malays have loosened their grip on political power to the point where the non-Malays no longer respect them and their institutions." He also said that everything deemed as Malay privileges has been challenged by non-Malays.

His message contained a hidden barb for Abdullah for 'not doing anything' to counter the situation or to strengthen the Malay position.

To some, Mahathir has become a man of contradiction, singing a different tune compared to his previous enunciation of a 'Bangsa Malaysia' when he was premier.

Mahathir's predicament

It is said that genius and eccentricity share a porous boundary particularly afflicting renowned practitioners in the arena of realpolitik.

"But politicians (or power itself) are abject because they merely embody the profound contempt people have for their lives," noted philosopher Jean Baudrillard.

"One should be grateful to politicians for accepting the abstractness of power and ridding others of its burden. This invariably kills them but they get their revenge by passing into

others the corpse of power.”

mahathir dr m umno kulai johor 300307 satrizeMahathir’s outspokenness during his tenure had earned him enormous respect, but he is now perceived to be a “troublemaker”.

In ‘Mahathir vs Abdullah: Covert wars and challenged legacies’, Nathaniel Tan wrote: “Tun Dr Mahathir’s ‘return’ to politics (spurning his retirement) was undoubtedly vigorous; whether it was vicious or valiant remains a controversial point of contention.”

Malaysiakini columnist Sim Kwang Yang wrote in the same publication: “... for a few months now (in 2006), the former PM has come out with his guns blaring, like the aged gunslinger in America’s Wild West, looking for his last hurrah!

“One must wonder: during these sunset golden years of his life, does he not want to spend more time relaxing in his garden, playing with his grandchildren, as Marlon Brando did in The Godfather? Is he not human after all?

“One can understand how difficult it is for a person devoted to a distinguished career in public life to retire gracefully.”

Newsweek writers Ron Moreau and Tony Emerson had, in 1999, described Mahathir as the longest serving ruler in Asia and “perhaps the most confusing; a man of modest personal tastes,” in an exclusive interview at the administrative capital, Putrajaya.

They also asked for his response to criticism that he had built ‘a palace (the prime minister’s residence) fit for a pharaoh’.

Mahathir shot back: “They can call me a pharaoh if they like. It’s not for me. I won’t be around much longer. It’s the residence for the prime minister, not Dr Mahathir the pharaoh.”

Pharaoh or not, there is generous consensus that Mahathir is not likely to lose his voice and nothing will stop his habitual outrageous, stinging rhetoric.

The Edge writer P Gunasegaram, in an article published in TheSun, wrote: “Mahathir’s time is up - it ended some three years ago when he gave up power (2003). To try to hold onto it by using his image and influence to force things is regrettable and will backfire on him eventually. It is more than time to move on.

“But we Malaysians often have this habit of shooting ourselves in our feet, blowing up larger than life political posturing into political crises instead of getting on with matters that matters. Mahathir is counting on that.”

Really, time is the only capital that any human being has and Mahathir, in retirement, should realise that it is one thing that he cannot afford to lose.

But HG Wells summed it rather nicely when he said, “The past is but the beginning of a beginning and all that is or has been is but the twilight of the dawn.”

This probably describes Mahathir’s predicament.

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