

Probe on Mahathir would be a hiding to nothing
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The call for a probe into the billions allegedly wasted on hubristic projects in the 22 years Dr Mahathir Mohamad was prime minister is wrongheaded.

Would-be investigators would find they are on a hiding to nothing, not because no waste occurred; it will be difficult to pin precise blame for it on any particular person.

Here it is useful to recall the episode of former prime minister Hussein Onn being forced to tender an abject apology when cabinet minutes were released to show that the initial decision to corner the London tin market, which became known as the Maminco affair, was taken in the last few months of his premiership in 1981.

The Maminco affair is one item in a now spiraling inventory of losses amounting to an estimated RM100 billion regarded as incurred during Mahathir's tenure as PM.

The Maminco affair only came to light a few years after Hussein left office, by which time he was publicly on record as critical of the way things were being done under Mahathir.

The sorry spectacle of Hussein, a man of honour known to be laborious with the fine print, apologising for something that occurred when he was in semi-retirement mode drew an anguished plea from the retired first PM, Tunku Abdul Rahman, that Hussein ought not be blamed for decisions taken in the twilight of his premiership.

In extenuation, the Tunku said he was also in semi-retirement mode from May 1969 to September 1970, the waning days of his premiership when his activist successor Abdul Razak Hussein virtually ran things while the Tunku was sequestered in the wilderness of his grief over the May 13 riots.

The supposed pillage of the public treasury under Mahathir owed more to a climate of opinion arising from May 13 than to the machinations of one man.

Public till a giant candy jar

Mahathir came to power representing a strain of political opinion that was apt to look on the past as unjust and at the future as the arena for rectification.

This stance was inclined to regard constitutional fetters on its freedom to act as colonial constructs, foisted on Malaysia by an inherently unjust order aimed at protecting its economic interests.

This rabid view combined with a blatant disregard for the dangers of forging a nexus between politics and business.

The upshot: a mortified public now discovers that the public treasury in Malaysia has become a field of ravenous appropriation in supposed furtherance of historically demanded equity.

A fortuitously timed book by a foreign journalist on Mahathir's premiership has dovetailed nicely with the national mood of piqued curiosity about how the public till has become a giant candy jar into which a legion of predators has dipped.

I mean when two fighter aircraft engines belonging to the air force are purloined right under the eyes of people in charge of the defence of the realm, the public naturally suspects that nothing is off-limits to Malaysia's brigands.

Thus Lim Kit Siang's call for a probe into alleged wantonness in the use of public funds by Mahathir receives an assist from the public perception that indeed larceny has occurred on a monumental scale.

Dr M's diversionary strike

Mahathir's feisty response to the call for a probe typifies the man. He steals his detractors' thunder by launching a preemptively diversionary strike: he welcomes the probe, reserves the right to sue, but wants successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's tenure similarly investigated.

It's like the Greeks say, character is fate. Octogenarian Mahathir is fated to end his years as he has lived it – combatively.

But Malaysian history need not resemble Greek tragedy where the protagonists go through to a final reconciliatory acceptance of their fate.

We have just to abjure the view that our 1957 Merdeka constitution is a colonial construct and forever hold in suspicion politicians with an overlay of vindictiveness to their make-up.

Instead of the futility of a probe on colossal waste, let's switch to charging those whom no less than a royal commission had found culpable in the Lingam videotape affair.

The commission held that there were clear violations of the law and the implicated Mahathir has pronounced his readiness to face his interlocutors because he wants the chance to tell on who tried to influence him on judicial appointments.

A man who cannot avoid seeing politics as a matter of public antagonism cannot resist, as usual, the low diversionary blow.

Let's give him the chance to reveal that he not only did not know that politics must be kept separate from business, but also from matters judicial.

It's a dichotomy Malaysia's first PM to come from outside the study of the law could not appreciate. And that is the chief source of the troubles now besetting us.

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