

A gripping account of the Mahathir years
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Barry Wain's treatise on the Mahathir years is a gripping account of the 22-year long era that spanned the 1981-2003 years, a period characterised by unprecedented economic and physical development and rapid urbanisation and social change.

It is overall, a fair and independent account with meticulous cross referencing and footnotes albeit much information attributed to oral interviews to a handful of persons and perhaps lacking in corroboration. Many snippets are attributed to Abdullah Ahmad but many who know Dollah Kok Lanang might prefer to take his assertions with some pinches of salt.

It is nevertheless, essential reading for anyone interested in an authoritative précis of the Mahathir years and a well-documented one at that.

Even to seasoned observers of Malaysian politics, this book is a very timely refresher. I noted some assertions that were news to me such as Anwar Ibrahim having graduated in Malay Studies with honours. I remember it often repeated that Anwar spent five years on a three-year degree and eventually earned a general pass degree (or was this political propaganda that I took for fact?).

Or that Zaid Ibrahim was a former member of Aliran? The now-transformed Zaid was seen as a rather conservative fellow in his younger days and was founder president of the Malaysian Muslim Lawyers' Association which took rather hardline positions under him in the 1980s so this is also a surprising revelation, if true.

Wain's account of the 1985 Memali event when 14 members of an armed Muslim group were killed in a confrontation with police omits the fact that Musa Hitam was in charge as acting prime minister.

Indeed, many observed that not a few hard situations were handled by Musa when Mahathir, by accident or design, was away overseas; a notable one being the Sabah constitutional crisis of 1985 when Harris Salleh and Mustapha Harun attempted to seize power to subvert Joseph Pairin Kitingan's electoral success.

Mahathir appeared to some as being incapable of taking hard decisions where it might affect his standing as prime minister and these two events are often quoted as events that might have taken different turns had Mahathir called the shots.

Of course, we know now that Mahathir sanctioned the assault on civil society activists attending the November 1996 Apcet II conference in Kuala Lumpur that resulted in the conference being forcibly stopped by Barisan Nasional rioters (with the cooperation of the police) and most of the participants carted to jail.

Mahathir kicked up a fuss

Another interesting reminder was Mahathir characterising China as a threat to Southeast Asia in his early years, this position was later to change to one where he asserted that China had never been a threat to others throughout its history as a nation.

There was considerable discussion of Mahathir's early animosity towards the British but a

very significant incident was missed. In 1981, Mahathir kicked up a fuss and caused the repatriation of a British envoy who had the 'audacity' of asserting publicly, (quite factually, to many observers) that British 'blood, sweat and tears' contributed much to Malaysia's development as a nation.

There is also a repetition of the commonly-held view that the ruling coalition first lost its two-thirds majority in the March 2008 general election. In fact, the combined opposition first accomplished this in May 1969, which was, in many ways, a mirror image of the 2008 result.

Anwar's trial was also described as the longest in Malaysian history. In fact, in recent courts history, this dubious distinction belongs to the Irene Fernandez trial.

In discussing Malaysia's first large financial scandal – the BMF (Bank Bumiputra Malaysia) case, it would have been interesting if the dismissal of Bank Negara's second governor, Aziz Taha in 1985 was researched as Aziz was reputed to be a 'no-nonsense' official of the Ismail Mohamed Ali genre and the circumstances of his dismissal at the height of the BMF scandal were never explained.

Many felt he was sacked for refusing to do something unconscionable. He was in turn succeeded by the late Jaffar Hussein, who was hand-picked by Mahathir from relative obscurity as a public accountant to head Malayan Banking, Malaysia's largest bank. Jaffar of course was seen tainted by the currency speculation fiasco and resigned in disgrace from Bank Negara together with Nor Mohamed Yakcop as documented in the book.

Overall, 'Malaysian Maverick' is a very well-researched book that is difficult to put down once one started reading it. Highly recommended!

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