

# TROUBLED

‘They think just because I gave that assurance, they can do what they like ... if somebody wants to sell Malaysia to other people ... because selling sand is tantamount to selling land as the sand will be used for reclamation.’

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**PUTRAJAYA:** Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched another blistering attack on the Government following its decision to scrap the building of a new bridge to replace the Causeway.

Dr Mahathir had mooted the bridge idea in 1996.

However, the Cabinet unanimously decided last week to call it off, after Singapore, whose consent is required for the Causeway to be dismantled, had asked for one billion cubic metres of sand over 20 years and the use of Johor airspace for its military aircraft as a condition for building the bridge.

Dr Mahathir has several times expressed his unhappiness over the Cabinet decision although the public reaction, including that of Members of Parliament sitting in the current session, has been supportive of the Cabinet.

Yesterday, he asked the media not to suppress his comments and said he would continue to air his views.

Dr Mahathir also claimed that some newspapers had received phone calls asking them “not to print this and that. Where is the Press freedom? I know the reporters are also unhappy because what they report is not published.

“Broadcast what I have to say. What I say is not even accurately published in the Press,” said Dr Mahathir, who was also Home Minister for nearly 15 years during his tenure as Prime Minister.

“During my time, (Anwar Ibrahim) demonstrations were reported. We never rang up the Press to tell them not to report. We do not ring up the Press.”

Dr Mahathir, who retired in October 2003 saying he would not interfere with the running of the Government under the new administration, was asked whether he was going back on his word by repeatedly attacking the Government’s decisions.

He said: “They think just because I gave that assurance, therefore they can do what they like. I may give that assurance, but if somebody wants to sell Malaysia to other people ... because selling sand is tantamount to selling land to other people as the sand will be used for reclamation.

“We made a mistake of giving Singapore to the British. You want to give some more?”

(The Cabinet scrap-

ped the decision to build the bridge because it did not want to supply sand to Singapore or allow its use of Johor airspace.)

Dr Mahathir said he would continue to give his opinion as “I never thought in my lifetime that this country would surrender its sovereignty to anybody.

“We fought very hard for independence, not these people, of course ... we try to restore Malaysia’s honour. It took a long time to restore *maruah bangsa*.

“Today, people respect us. But if we do this and surrender to Singapore, then you lose your honour.”

Dr Mahathir maintained there was “no legal reason for us not to (go ahead with the bridge)”.

“The reason we cannot talk with Singapore is because they want to link everything to everything. One thing cannot be resolved, everything cannot be resolved, that is how they do things.”

Dr Mahathir claimed that in a letter written to him by former Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong, “he said if we wanted to build bridge on our side, he would respect it even if it was not ideal to him. No conditions imposed”.

Dr Mahathir, who himself did not brook much opposition when he was prime minister, cautioned the present administration that “if you don’t listen to other opinions, you will go wrong. If you only listen to your supporters, they will not say anything and you will get the wrong idea”.

“Please remember what happened to Tunku for not listening to the people. The most recent example would be Thaksin. They did not listen to the people and they got into trouble. Suppress people’s opinion and you may get away with the idea that you are right but you will find out one day that you are wrong,” he said.

Dr Mahathir was a strong critic of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country’s first Prime Minister. However, shortly after he became Prime Minister, in a highly publicised event, Dr Mahathir kissed the Tunku’s hand and sought his forgiveness.

(Thaksin Shinawatra stepped down as Prime Minister earlier this month following street protests in Bangkok. He remains popular among Thailand’s majority rural population who have continued to support him. Thaksin’s party, Thai Rak Thai, won freshly held elections in Thailand this month — boycotted by the opposition — and remains in power.)

Asked whether he wanted to be a senior minister like Goh Chok Tong since he was continuously giving his opinions, Dr Mahathir said: “I am not going to be some senior minister or minister mentor. I am an ordinary citizen and as an ordinary citizen, I will voice my opinion.

“It is up to the Government to accept my views or not. It does not matter to me.”



# WATERS OVER BRIDGE

“ We beg to differ. We would never sell the country off. What the Government did was the best decision in the existing circumstances.”

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**PUTRAJAYA:** Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had this to say about former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's criticisms of the Government over the decision to scrap the second bridge to Singapore:

“We beg to differ. We would never sell the country off. What the Government did was the best decision in the existing circumstances.”

Responding to Dr Mahathir's argument that the bridge project should have gone ahead, Syed Hamid said each administration had its own approach in dealing with issues.

“(Dr Mahathir) must give a chance to the current leadership to do what is best in the circumstances.”

“In the first place, it is not proper for us to go into a debate with a former prime minister, a senior statesman, for whom we all have great respect.”

Syed Hamid also disagreed with Dr Mahathir's reiteration that it was Malaysia's sovereign right to build its own portion of the bridge.

“We had gone through it very carefully and thoroughly, we just cannot act unilaterally.”

“Just as when Malaysia submitted its objections over Singapore's reclamation work for international arbi-

tration; if we had gone ahead and referred Singapore to the international court for this matter, it would be unending for years to come,” he said

As for statements by Dr Mahathir on “selling off the country”, Syed Hamid said this would never happen as the administration would do everything within its power to ensure the nation is not “sold off”, even if its decisions were “unfavourable to some”.

Syed Hamid said if the Government had not scrapped the bridge project, it would have failed in its duty to the people.

He reiterated that the Cabinet “unanimously decided” to scrap the project only “after much deliberation, including on legal implications”.

He said in making the decision, the Cabinet members had participated in a lengthy discussion to weigh all matters concerned.

The Cabinet, he said, was also briefed by the Attorney-General's Chambers on the legal consequences had it gone ahead with the project, mooted some 10 years ago by Dr Mahathir.

Syed Hamid refused to comment further on the issue as he did not want to be “entangled in a debate” with the former prime minister.

