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Tun Mahathir points an accusing finger at the opposition bench during a Dewan Rakyat sitting on Dec 20, 1999. Seated on the left is Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who succeeded him to the top post.

# Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003)

FATHER OF MODERNISATION

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“IT is not for me to say whether I have succeeded or not. The people and history will judge and determine whether my service was good or bad.”

Ironically, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's last speech as Umno president at the party's general assembly in 2003, is the question that many people continue to ask today - was he the nation's greatest statesman?

But for a man who actually changed time, nothing was impossible for Dr M, and Malaysians owe him a great deal for putting our tiny dot of a nation on the world map.

It was his persistence that helped propel the country to become among the fastest developing nations. He earned the nickname *Bapa Wawasan* (Father of Vision), an allusion to his vision of making Malaysia a developed nation by 2020.

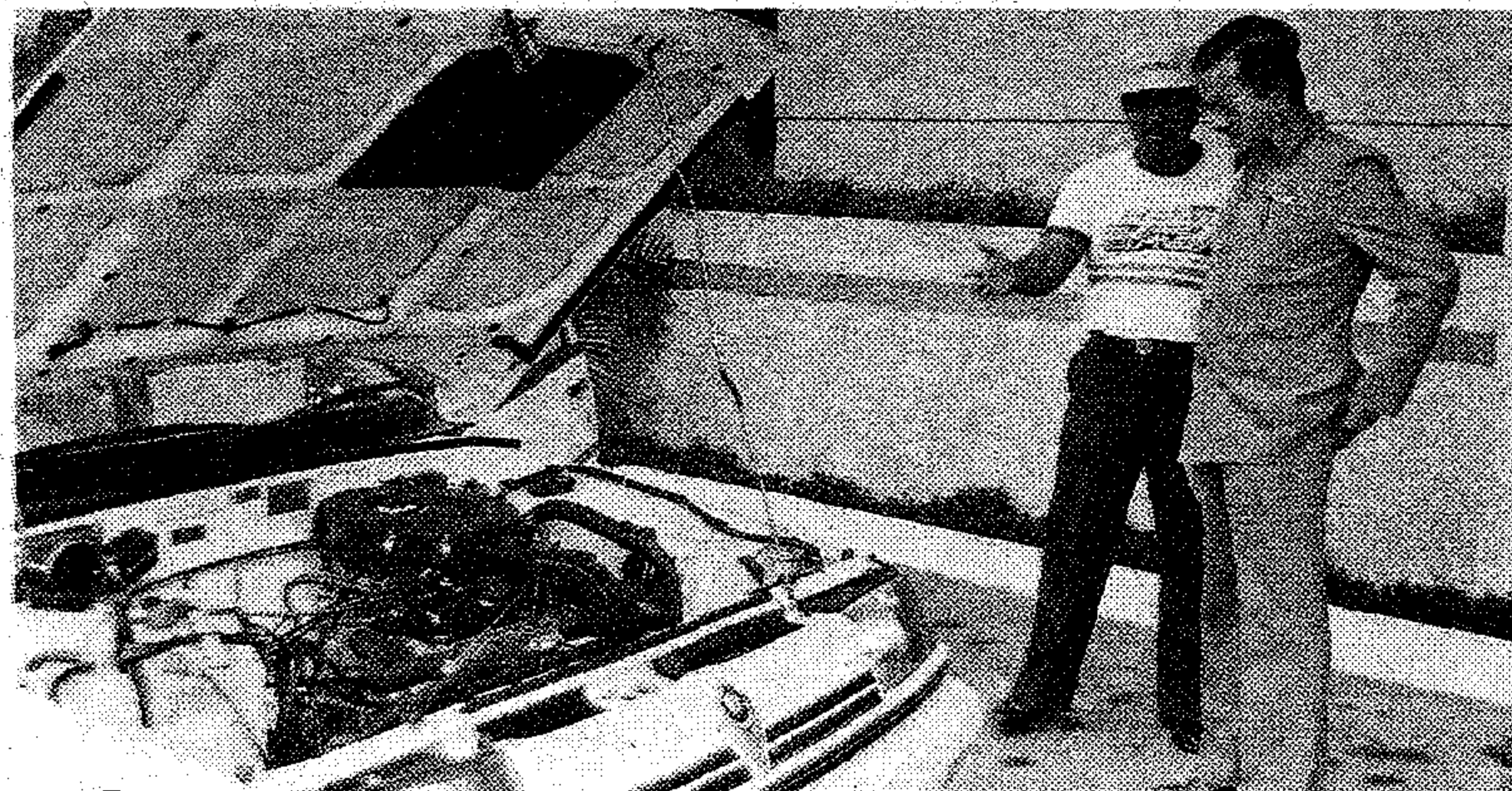
“Dr M demanded a lot from others but much more of himself. Failure was not an option,” says a former aide.

His dressing down of the Malays for being dependent on “crutches” and not being competitive enough in an era of globalisation was an annual tirade at Umno general assemblies.

True, he did things his way, making unpopular decisions without any apologies, but critics eventually agreed his decisions were right.

A case in point was the pegging of the ringgit to the US dollar in the wake of the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis. Mahathir argued that an International Monetary Fund or World Bank loan would push the nation further into debt and delay the country's recovery period - an opinion his deputy and then finance minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim did not share.

But while other nations are still reeling from the effects of the 1997



Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad being shown the first Proton model (Proton Saga) in the mid-1980s. For almost a decade under his premiership, the economy grew at a dizzying rate of about 9% per year.

crisis, Malaysia, thanks to Mahathir, and by the World Bank's own admission, has rebounded handsomely with minimal aftershocks.

His focus on industrialising the country and his grand plans may have seemed a little far-fetched, excessive and unachievable to many, but Mahathir dared to dream - and he dreamt big.

The national car Proton, the administrative capital of Putrajaya, the Petronas Twin Towers and the Penang Bridge were among the jaw-dropping projects executed under his tenure.

Cyberpace and even outerspace have become realities for Malaysia, and who would have ever thought that the quiet agricultural enclave of Sepang would one day be home to one of the world's best airports and a Formula One circuit?

But Mahathir's administration was criticised for its poor human rights record, with the tightening and implementation of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secrets Act and of the Internal Security Act (ISA).

The 1987 *Ops Lalang* saw the detention without trial of more than 100 political opponents and critics

of his administration under the ISA.

*The Star*, of which first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was chairman, was suspended following reports that were deemed sympathetic to the detainees. *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Watan* were also suspended.

While he received the backing of most Malaysians when he clipped the powers of royalty, the assault on the judiciary with the sacking of Lord President Tun Salleh Abas in 1988 remains one of - if not the darkest - episodes of his administration.

However, Mahathir's supporters and the man himself saw these as necessary evils.

“For a country to progress, drastic measures need to be taken so that these efforts are not derailed,” he once said.

The most drastic measure took place in September 1998 when he unceremoniously sacked his heir apparent Anwar on charges of sexual misconduct and corruption.

Both Mahathir and Anwar will probably take the real reason for their fallout to the grave, but Mahathir is known to be a man who does things his way, preferably without differing views - how else can one

explain the fact that he survived three deputies?

When *Time* magazine named him “Asia's Newsmaker” in 1998, it was not surprising.

His role as a critic of the West brought him many admirers from Cuba to China, with Fidel Castro regarding him as a champion of the Third World.

His administration's icy relations with Singapore and Australia, meanwhile, have only recently begun to thaw under Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Today, Mahathir spends his time as head of the Perdana Leadership Foundation think tank, giving talks and campaigning against war. Being one of Abdullah's most strident critics, Mahathir continues to make life difficult for his successor, as he did for his previous deputy Anwar.

However, his post-retirement tirades against the current administration indicate that he seems oblivious of the events he was responsible for during the 22 years he was in power.

**Under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's premiership:**

- » Time zones between the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak synchronised
- » Malaysia Inc. launched
- » Bank Islam established
- » First national car project launched - Proton Saga becomes Malaysia's first car
- » Penang Bridge, Southeast Asia's longest, built
- » Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eight Malaysia plans launched
- » Bahasa Baku programme introduced in lower secondary schools but fails
- » Vision 2020 revealed
- » Malaysia Online with project Jaring launched
- » Tenaga Nasional and Telekom Malaysia privatised
- » North South Highway completed
- » Multimedia Super Corridor, with Cyberjaya as its hub, formed



“If you don't know how to ride a horse, you will fall off. I have fallen off a horse three times. But to get the balance, to be in rhythm with the animal and all that, is something that you can achieve only if you learn. I had to learn about finance.”

Putrajaya, 2003

“History is a great teacher which can help us create a better world. But unfortunately the lessons of history are often ignored, sometimes deliberately. And because we ignore the lessons of history we keep on repeating the mistakes of the past and we suffer accordingly.”

International Association of Historians of Asia, 2000

- » Measat 1, Malaysia's first satellite, launched into space
- » Petronas Twin Towers, the world's tallest buildings, completed
- » Light Rail Transit changes the face of urban transportation
- » KL International Airport in Sepang opened
- » Formula One races in Malaysia
- » Pegging of RM3.8 to US\$1 during the 1997 financial crisis
- » Putrajaya becomes administrative centre