

# The father of modern Malaysia

An avowed Asian economic nationalist who in 2003 denounced 'Anglo-Saxon Europeans' as proponents of 'war, sodomy and genocide', former Malaysian prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad presents a softer side to **Stefan Herrick**

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**T**UN Dr Mahathir Mohamad is choosing his words carefully. In Malaysia, it is considered the height of bad manners to show discourtesy to your host, and today his host is New Zealand.

"I think New Zealand understands Asia much better than Australia," he says.

"I think there is some way to go before Australia can identify itself with Asian countries, but I think New Zealand has made better progression in that sense. When people talk about becoming the deputy sheriff and things like that, that's not very welcome in our region."

There was a time when Dr Mahathir — prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003 — lumped New Zealand in with Australia in his lively anti-Western rhetoric. He argued that as European colonial states, New Zealand and Australia had little in common with East Asian countries and should not be included in groupings on regional affairs.

But today, Dr Mahathir has toned things down. "Australia seems to identify itself with Europe and America, but New Zealand has got a completely different world view."

It's hardly a ringing endorsement of New Zealand's inclusion in the East Asia club, but from an avowed Asian economic nationalist who in 2003 denounced "Anglo-Saxon Europeans" as proponents of "war, sodomy and genocide", it may represent a slight softening of position.

This week Dr Mahathir was in Wellington to deliver the 2006 Malay Studies Saad Lecture at Victoria University. The New Zealand Malaysian and Muslim communities turned out in their hundreds to hear the father of modern Malaysia, a congenial, slightly built, youthful-looking 81-year-old whose emergence in a room either makes a crowd burst into applause, or go deathly silent.

The event had something of a Jimmy Carter-ish feel, as the former statesman spoke stridently of peace, arbitration and reconciliation. Military aggression, except in defence, should be criminalised, he said, and warmongers — a pointed reference to the United States — should be brought to justice by the international community. What's more, democracies should work toward the day when only pacifists were elected to office.

"The theme of criminalising war is radically idealistic and it has a Quaker ring to it — but is none the worse for that," says retired New Zealand diplomat Terence O'Brien, who was in the audience. "Voices of moderate and successful Muslim leaders, or ex-leaders, need and deserve to be heard in these times."

Though one of the few Muslim leaders fortunate enough to be in a position to promote a moderate line and openly em-

brace Western-style development, Dr Mahathir's relationship with the Western powers could hardly be described as easy.

After a small disagreement with Britain over university tuition fees in the early 1980s, he launched a "Buy British Last" campaign against his old colonial occupiers. He's no fan of Australia, which he regards as America's deputy sheriff in the South Pacific. He has described Australians as "the white trash of Asia" (though this comment has also been attributed to Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew).

But the most astringent criticism has been directed at the US for its unilateral approach to world affairs, support of Israel and vilification of Islam. At the Saad lecture, Dr Mahathir compared the actions of US President George W Bush in invading Iraq to the genocidal tendencies of Saddam Hussein. He said US arms makers used the recent conflict between Lebanon and Israel as a "live test" for cluster bombs.

"I think Bush is not a person that we should get close to," he says.

**T**hough best known in the West for imprisoning Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Mahathir's former protégé, deputy and enthusiastic proponent of IMF economic medicine, on sodomy and corruption charges, Dr Mahathir looms large in Asia as one of the most influential leaders of his generation.

During his 22 years in power, Dr Mahathir transformed a country of steaming oil-palm plantations, tin mines, rubber smallholdings and deep ethnic divisions into a relatively harmonious and genuinely successful hi-tech Muslim state.

Dr Mahathir was Malaysia's version of Rob Muldoon, who as prime minister of New Zealand in the 1970s, embarked on a series of Think Big civil engineering projects that were supposed to propel the country to a prosperous, modern future. Dr Mahathir's projects were somewhat larger: the Bakun Dam (for a time the region's biggest hydro-electrical project), the Petronas Towers (for a time the world's tallest buildings), a multimedia super corridor to eclipse Silicon Valley, and a new automotive industry. As with New Zealand, a few turned out to be white elephants.

At the core of his reformist economic policy was the desire to improve the lot of the economically backward Malay majority. This affirmative action "Malaysia for Malays" programme was only partially successful. In his resignation address in 2002, eyes awash with tears, Dr Mahathir choked his way through what amounted to an apology that his vision was unrealised.

Some would say he's still working on it.

Despite assurances that there would be no power struggle after the premiership was handed to Abdullah Badawi, Mahathir was unable to melt away quietly.

Almost from day one, Dr Mahathir has nibbled at the authority of Mr Badawi. Mr Badawi, though hand-picked as his successor, was not his first or even second choice, Dr Mahathir later said. If Dr Mahathir had expected Mr Badawi to fail, and for UMNO — the ruling party — to beg him to return, he was to be badly disappointed. Pious and softly spoken, Mr Badawi proved to be very much his own man, and demonstrated surprising toughness in tackling corruption, eliminating cronyism and preaching a doctrine of comparative political harmony.

His former boss became increasingly vocal when Mr Badawi suggested that fewer Think Big projects were on Malaysia's horizon, and that the long lines of patronage might have to be cut under a cleaner approach to government. Dr Mahathir could contain himself no longer when Mr Badawi abruptly cancelled one of his pet projects: the construction of a bridge that would have replaced part of the causeway between Malaysia and its upmarket island neighbour, Singapore. What had been low-level

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sniping erupted into a full-blown feud. "Why would a man who led his country to such great economic heights, and in the process established global stature for himself as a spokesman for the developing

world, try to tear it all down in retirement?" asked the *Asia Times* this week.

"This is not a personal thing," Dr Mahathir says at his Wellington press conference. "My difference with him is regarding certain things that he's doing with which I disagree and I have told him that I will continue to criticise the government if I find the government doing something that is detrimental to the interests of Malaysia or the people of Malaysia."

A day after leaving New Zealand, Dr Mahathir suffered a mild heart attack, having complained that the feud with his successor was taking a toll on his health.

Though some Malaysians are relieved that the polarising politics of the Mahathir era are over, and regard his recent behaviour as churlish, the reception at Victoria University would have reassured Dr Mahathir that for all his faults, he is still deeply admired.

After the Saad lecture, pretty girls in tudongs, young Somalis and Asians of half a dozen nationalities stirred up the stairs and formed a tight, excited scrum around the smiling former colossus. A school exercise book was violently dismembered and scraps of paper thrust forward for Dr Mahathir. He signed each with a flourish.