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## Leader who played a tough parent role

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**FIRM:** Dr Mahathir's 'harsh' tone helped propel the nation to new heights

**A** FOREIGN observer recently described Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's world view as "harsh" even as it bears reflecting upon.

As a long-time admirer of the Tun, this writer does not necessarily disagree with the above observation of our fourth prime minister. Dr Mahathir may be harsh in the sense that tough disciplinarian parents believe they have to be tough with their children in order to be kind.

The question, of course, is whether it is relevant and appropriate for leaders to treat citizens they rule over as children.

As with bringing up children, it is worth pondering if Dr Mahathir's world view — and therefore his

utterances and methods — is not borne out of an overpowering conviction that there really is no other choice.

Many right-thinking grown-ups will quite naturally and understandably take offence with the former prime minister treating everyone as mere children.

But it is key to understanding the man, perhaps, by separating the individual as an ordinary mortal like you and me, and as a leader who took the country to heights which even his detractors have to grudgingly concede.

As an ordinary human, Dr Mahathir has raised a brood of fine children of his own, each no doubt with an individual mind of his or her own. None more so perhaps than Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.



John Teo

But running a country is totally a different ball game from running a family. In fact, from observations gleaned from the jottings of both Dr Mahathir himself and Marina, running the country — and before that, being an active, up-and-coming politician — consumed much of his time, often at the expense of time



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's world view reflects his pragmatism

with his family.

While Dr Mahathir could rely on Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Ali to run his private household, he obviously could not but husband the affairs of state alone and single-handedly, always without even consulting wife or family members, as it turned out. And husbanding state affairs in a country like ours, one can only assume, required a leader in all senses of that word and not just a national steward.

A steward may be sufficient as far as national leadership goes if most of the tasks of nation-building are already settled or if a nation does not have the difficulties that Malaysia — given our ethnic heterogeneity — has in forging a sufficiently broad national consensus on the way forward.

The most intractable difficulty for the most, if not all emerging nations, has to do with forging broad political consensus. In the Malaysian context, we not only have to contend with all the multifarious identity issues (real even though often overlooked or altogether denied by those with a more liberal bent) but also social and economic expectations at multiple levels of sophistication.

This writer is occasionally confronted with the query as to why Malaysia chooses to compare itself with poorer and less advanced neighbours in the region, and not the more advanced nations further afield. The query can just as easily be turned on its head: why, exactly, was Malaysia able to pull away from the pack of other poor, developing nations — even ones as well endowed with natural resources as Malaysia without the serious social fissures of a mul-

tiethnic society like ours?

Many other nations would dearly wish to be at the level of our national station right now. Why were they not able to achieve so? Could it not be because they did not have the benefit of national leaders of Dr Mahathir's calibre?

Some Malaysians today decry Dr Mahathir for causing political divisions rather than helping forge unity as an elder statesman. This writer begs to disagree.

If anything, Dr Mahathir, as the pragmatic realist that he has always been, is only bringing forth into sharp relief the deep divisions that still exist in our midst.

Malaysia today seems divided between those who still believe the unique political and economic order we have forged thus far is still relevant and those who seem to think it has outlived its usefulness. Ironically, some Malaysians hanker for a "model" more in tune with Western (universal?) norms even as the West itself is undergoing its own deep social, political and economic crisis.

Perhaps the West has finally gone "soft"? And Dr Mahathir may be warning us all against going that same way, in his usual "harsh" tone.

✉ [johnteo808@gmail.com](mailto:johnteo808@gmail.com)