

Newspaper	MALAYSIAKINI
Date	28 JULY 2016

Should we give Mahathir a chance to save Malaysia?

Malaysiakini – 28 July 2016

COMMENT | The quick answer is, “Yes, but...”

Dennis Ignatius, a veteran of Malaysia’s foreign service, recently **wrote an article** in which he said, “Mahathir may not be the ideal candidate to lead the charge for change but, like it or not, he is now the only one with the experience, the standing, and the gravitas to seriously challenge Umno-BN.”

Dennis said that “our nation is deteriorating rapidly, and our democracy is dying.” I agree with both points that Dennis made. The question is - why should we give former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad a chance?

Every time Mahathir’s challenge to PM Najib Razak is raised, there has been no shortage of people who point out that it was Mahathir who subverted Malaysia’s political institutions, which Najib has now used to his advantage. There is no shortage of people who point to the corruption and cronyism that occurred during Mahathir’s era.

But to me, there is no comparison between Mahathir’s day and the incredible kleptocracy that we see today under Najib. In the old days, people were content to steal millions. Then it was tens of millions. Now, under Najib, it is billions that have disappeared.

In the old days, Siti Hasmah was respected; today Rosmah is despised. In the old days, Mahathir flew on Malaysia Airlines (MAS); today Rosmah and Najib fly around the world for shopping trips on private jets.

There are many people, myself included, who say that it does no good to get rid of a corrupt leader like Najib - if there is no change to the Malaysian political system itself. All we will do is substitute one devil for the other.

Mahathir spent his political life bashing America, and there was no love lost between us during my time as ambassador when he decided after the Asian Financial Crisis to blame America, day after day, for everything that had happened. That was followed by his arrest of then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. That led to even more tensions between our two countries.

But I was there, and I knew the truth about what happened. I knew the truth about the charges against Anwar. I also knew what happened to all of the economies in Southeast Asia, and why.

So I thought it was totally unfair for Mahathir to blame everything on the United States. That was the easy way out for him - it was America and the “orang puteh’s” fault, and it had nothing to do with him.