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# M'sia's recent history — as Musa Hitam sees it

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WRITERS of autobiographies often get so caught up telling their own stories that they somehow fail to give the reader a sense of the broader sweep of history. Not so with Tun Musa Hitam's book entitled "Frankly Speaking". At every turn the author places events and personalities in a broader context, even as he explains the decisions he made and their consequences, both for himself and for the nation as a whole.

Musa has been uniquely positioned to witness some of the most important developments in Malaysia's post-independence history. In this book, the tone of national politics both before and after Singapore's exit from the Malaysian Federation in 1965 is captured from the point of view of a bright young political secretary, while the tragic events of May 1969 and Musa's subsequent relegation to the political wilderness tell the story of a high profile backbencher who fell afoul of the leadership of the day.

Recruited back into the fold in 1971 by Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (whom he greatly admired) and later appointed to a Cabinet position, Musa rose quickly through the ranks of Umno, eventually becoming deputy prime minister (DPM) under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1981.

## Dr Mahathir and Najib

Many readers of this book will probably turn immediately to the chapter on Dr Mahathir, wanting to know how the author describes his fallout with that long-serving PM. They may also be interested in reading the author's account of his sensational resignation in 1986 and the subsequent struggle for control of Umno in 1987. Others will perhaps be more eager to seek out Musa's views on current politics, particularly his opinion of the performance of the nation's current PM, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak.

Musa insists that he resigned as DPM after Dr Mahathir accused him privately of plotting against him. Dr Mahathir's version — that Musa was upset because talented Kelantanese politician Tan Sri Tengku Razaleigh Tengku Mohd Hamzah had been

retained in the Cabinet after Musa had defeated him in the contest for the Umno deputy presidency in 1984 — is flatly rejected. As for the oft-repeated narrative that Musa then teamed up with Tengku Razaleigh to challenge the Mahathir-Ghaffar combination in the 1987 party elections, Musa points to the fact that he — not Tun Abdul Ghaffar Baba — was the incumbent party VP. "The reality is that I did not challenge Abdul Ghaffar. He challenged me!"

Musa's approach to current politics is tinged with foreboding. Malaysia, he says, could soon "find itself gripped by reactionary forces that even now are advocating policies and practices that — if adopted — would eventually result in the country becoming a failed state". But while Najib does get some of the blame, Musa traces the roots of the problem to Dr Mahathir: "To the restrictive measures introduced after the 1969 riots was added a strong personality who would get his way on most things. That was the beginning of the move away from a performance-based, or ideology-based politics towards one that was based primarily on political loyalty — the sort of politics we still see in Malaysia today."

That said, the elder statesman cannot bring himself to predict chaos and destruction: "Will Malaysia reverse direction and become a fully developed society? We can only wait and see."

## Memali

There are at least two other subjects in this book Musa would probably want readers to take notice of. The first is his success in calming protesters during the Baling demonstrations in late 1974. The second is the extent to which his role in the Memali Tragedy has been misconstrued. Of these, Musa would almost certainly regard the latter as more important. After all, he describes Memali as "the biggest black mark on my political career".

As both DPM and home affairs minister, Musa was clearly responsible for internal security when violence broke out between police and villagers in the small Kedah *kampung* (village) in November 1985. But Musa flatly rejects the suggestion that he ordered the bloody crackdown that resulted in the deaths of 18 people, including four policemen. His standing instructions, he says, were for police to avoid situations that could lead to violence when attempting to detain Ibrahim Mahmood, the charis-



Picture by Mohd Amin Nohari

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matic and deviationist Muslim preacher that so concerned the authorities at the time.

Musa does not say who actually ordered police to move in. But he does make a point of contradicting the belief — widely held for decades — that PM Dr Mahathir was not in the country when the crackdown took place.

## Two Themes

The two themes in the book that stand out the most for me, however, are: 1) The way Musa describes the evolution of his political thought; and 2) the incisive assessments he makes of some of the key personalities that have shaped the nation's destiny.

As Musa tells it, one of the most striking incidents that influenced his political thought took place in 1955 when, as a young student barely out of secondary school, he attended a multinational youth camp in Hong Kong. It was here that Musa camped with other international students on Lantau Island

where the group built a playground for handicapped children.

The trip had been arranged by Arthur Hinton, one of Musa's secondary school teachers. Hinton was a Quaker who took his faith very seriously. But he also had great respect for other religions. Each morning, Hinton would invite members of the international team to recite from their respective scriptures. Musa, who up to that point had received a very narrow religious education, was impressed. "There I was for the first time in an international atmosphere, with youth from different parts of the world listening to each person recite from his own holy book by turn."

For Musa, it was something he will never forget. "I suppose if Muslim extremists want to say that I was corrupted, that was the time. If liberals want to know how I became liberal, that was also the time."

## Hussein Onn

Peppered throughout the book are

anecdotes about various political leaders that have moulded Musa's attitude towards corruption, accountability and dedication to the nation. Chief among them are stories about Abdul Razak, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman and, of course, his mentor, Tun Sardon Jubir.

There is also an additional chapter detailing Musa's impressions of various politicians who have shaped Malaysia's political development. All these assessments are interesting in their own right. But perhaps the most notable is the story he tells of Tun Hussein Onn's reaction on being recalled from his holiday in London to take up the job of DPM in 1973.

Hussein's response was to say that he had travelled on a cheap airline ticket and couldn't redeem it to return to Malaysia urgently. The government reacted by issuing instructions to the Malaysian High Commission in London to purchase new tickets for him. But Hussein refused to accept them, saying that it was not proper for the government to bear his travelling costs since he was not on government business at the time.

"I was impressed with his humility," Musa comments, adding wryly that it was "the sort of leadership we had in those days".

## No Malice

One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is the almost complete lack of malice, even when the author is referring to people for whom he clearly does harbour significant reservations.

For example, Musa takes several pages to list the genuinely positive personality traits of Dr Mahathir before he can bring himself to outline what he regards as that leader's numerous deficiencies. The approach adds to the book's credibility, helping to convince the reader that the writer is an elder statesman of the highest order.

Some observers have described Musa as the best PM the nation never had. After reading this book, many more may be tempted to agree.

(Bruce Gale assisted Tun Musa Hitam with the research during the writing of this book.)

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