

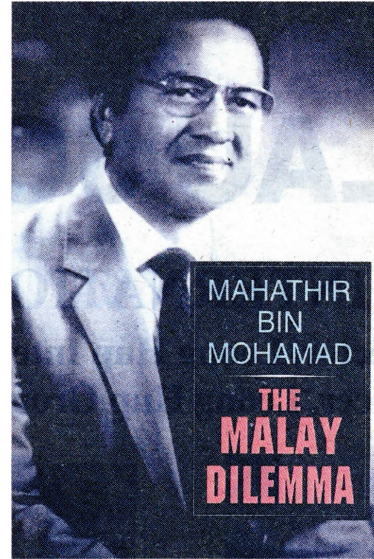
Whither Malaysia now?

THE Kongres Maruah Melayu, or Malay Dignity Congress, held in a stadium near Kuala Lumpur on Oct 6 raised a furore among Malaysians. Organised by four public universities - including Universiti Malaya, the nation's premier institution of higher learning - the congress was attended by about 5,000 people, mostly students but also leading politicians from Umno and PAS.

Rather than a forum to discuss issues faced by Malays and ways to overcome them, the congress has been widely condemned as a racist gathering. In his speech, Zainal Kling, the chief convener of the conference, declared that Malaysia belonged to Malays and reminded other races of their "social contract" with Malays, claiming it was the basis for granting them citizenship rights which could be revoked if they breached the agreement (bit.ly/dignity_congress).

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad aroused public ire by attending the conference; critics saw his decision to participate as a betrayal of the ideals of the reformist Pakatan Harapan coalition which toppled the previous Barisan government in a shock landslide victory at the polls last year.

Dr Mahathir made his mark as a champion of Malay rights early on. In *The Malay Dilemma* published in 1970, he argued passionately that due to hereditary and geographical factors, the Malays could not keep pace with Chinese immigrants and advocated special rights for the Malays. He became the chief architect of Dasar Ekonomi Baru, or the New Economic Policy (NEP), which



was unveiled in 1972 for a term of 20 years and was designed to accelerate the development of the Malay majority (comprising circa 60% of the population of 32 million now) through affirmative action.

The NEP failed to achieve its stated goals, and Dr Mahathir stepped down as PM in 2003, but after 20 years in place, NEP privileges came to be seen as entitlement and could not be dismantled. Meanwhile, the Malaysian economy trails behind smaller Asian territories with fewer natural resources such as South Korea, Taiwan or even Singapore (2018 GDP).

In his 50-minute speech at the dignity conference, Dr Mahathir pointed out that the NEP failed "because the effort by the Malays was less than expected or hoped" and warned that "as long as we do

not change our lifestyle, as long as we are unwilling to strive to face challenges at work, we will be left behind". He said, "Our dignity depends on our achievement, not on government aid. If we are capable of making good products and creating wealth, no one will look down upon us.

"I believe that the Malay people have the capability but there is a difference between capability and willingness to work. They can do it but don't want to do it," he chided. "We can build our dignity with our achievements in all fields," he declared. "Otherwise there will be another 10 dignity conferences and nothing will change.

"What I am saying may be hard to accept... but this is the truth of what has happened and this is what will be inherited by the young generation of which there are many in this auditorium today." (Video at bit.ly/dignity_video.)

But his words fell on deaf ears and resolutions passed at the conference made no reference to his pleas. There were calls instead for key government positions including the prime minister, deputy prime minister, finance, education, defence and home ministries and the attorney general to be reserved for Malay Muslims only. Another resolution called for the abolition of vernacular (Tamil and Chinese medium) schools. ("Resolutions on five areas presented at Malay Dignity Congress, but PM says not all will be met", *The Star*, Oct 6; online at bit.ly/star_dignity.)

At 94, Mahathir has little need to make polite speeches to cling to power. Time is not on his side. He

loves his people and deserves praise for his tireless efforts to change them but he forewarned in *The Malay Dilemma* that because politics created for the Malays a soft environment which removed all challenge to their survival and progress, "political power might ultimately prove their complete downfall". No other Malay leader has shown equal foresight.

To a significant degree, the previous government fell because of a massive corruption scandal involving the theft of billions of dollars by then prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak. But, partly through a lack of administrative experience and partly due to foot-dragging by civil servants loyal to the previous government (which had been in power for 61 years), the current Pakatan Harapan coalition has failed to deliver on much of its reform agenda and is far from certain to win the next general election.

Malaysia has often been held up as a model Muslim-majority country but in a society where it is all too easy to play the race and religion card, the economy will not realise its full potential and the political future of minorities will remain at risk.

MICHAEL TAI
Kuala Lumpur

Note: The writer is an associate fellow at Universiti Malaya's Institute of China Studies and the author of China And Her Neighbors: Asian Politics And Diplomacy From Ancient History To The Present Day.