

Dr M doesn't love me after all

And the feeling is mutual after he said some very bad things about his fellow citizens.

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad has a problem with me. Well, he must have since I identify myself as a Malaysian Chinese, I eat with chopsticks and not my hand (which would be hard for me since I am left-handed), and I believe my country is constitutionally multiracial - all stuff he finds disagreeable.

And oh yes, he thinks I am rich since I am Chinese.

That's a great pity because I used to admire him a lot. I even included in my book a whole chapter called "The Mahathirs" comprising articles I wrote for *The Star* based on exclusive interviews with his lovely wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, in 1996, and the Mahathir children in 2003 for a special supplement to mark his retirement as our fourth prime minister.

I was happy to include the Mahathir chapter because, as I explain in the book (*So Auntie, So What? And Some More*, 2019), I believed the stories were "of public interest as they provide great insights into the private side of Dr Mahathir and his family.

I realise now how naive I was to make that claim. I might have covered him extensively as a reporter during his 22-year tenure; I might have read his memoirs, *A Doctor in the House* (2011), and compiled extracts from it; and I might have been on friendly terms with a few of his family members, but none of that really gave me any real insight into what this man truly is about.

Still, his self-confidence, intelligence and visionary leadership were undeniable. When he announced his sudden decision to retire at the 56th Umno General Assembly on June 22, 2002, I praised him for knowing when to



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So aunty, so what?

"exit with grace and style".

The whole nation seemed to feel bereft at the departure of this larger-than-life father figure that many Malaysians had grown up with.

A year after his retirement, I drafted his obituary as part of the newspaper's standard preparations for the demise of important figures. He was close to 80 at that time. Again, it was a glowing tribute honouring his stewardship and I listed his many achievements that would make up his long legacy.

Parts of it read: "We didn't always understand nor fully trust him sometimes, especially when his ambitions seemed so grand and impossible for a little nation like ours. But in Dr Mahathir's mind, Malaysia was not a dinky little Third World no-account country. We were a nation with the potential to compete with the best and if we did it right, we would take our place in the sun.

"His message to us was: Stand up and be counted and don't let anyone bully you. He took that message to the world arena and showed his mettle when he dared to speak up against the superpowers and he became the hero of the developing world."

While I believe this draft still

holds true, what I had overlooked were the many costly scandals and missteps during his tenure.

In his book, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times* (2009), the late Barry Wain, a former *Asian Wall Street Journal* editor, claimed that during Dr Mahathir's term in office from 1981 to 2003, billions had been squandered through mismanagement, corruption and financial scandals.

Despite the tremendous losses, the nation pulled through and without the Internet, social media, and whistleblowers, and protected by secrecy laws, Dr M remained untouched and could leave office in 2003 riding a massive wave of public affection and adulation. I too was swept up in that wave.

When he returned, aged 93, as our PM again in 2018, he was welcomed and feted like a rock star, at home and internationally. We hailed him as a great statesman who could reconcile with bitter rival Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and even cooperate with the political party he had hated, DAP, to save the nation from corruption.

But unlike his first PMship, his second tenure of less than two years - from May 2018 to March 2020 - showed he was no longer the commanding leader of old.

Perhaps we had put too much hope and expectations on him to do the right thing for Malaysia Baharu, especially rebooting our politics of race and religion that had divided society so badly.

Instead, what we got was a tremendous sense of betrayal and the fall of a government because he had his own agenda and was never quite sincere about handing over the reins to Anwar nor implementing Pakatan Harapan's election manifesto.

Like many, I thought his shocking defeat in the 2022 general election would be a clear signal to him that he should finally accept his time in politics was over. After all, in his memoirs, he wrote in chapter 42, "I always believe that when something is done which is wrong, someone needs to tell the person concerned." His fall from grace was entirely of his own making and the voters of his erstwhile Langkawi parliamentary seat had told him just that.

It was again naive of me to believe that. How could he stay silent and take it when Anwar, his former prodigy turned greatest nemesis that he tried to stymie at every turn, had at long last prevailed and had become our 10th prime minister?

All that Dr Mahathir has said and done since then is to bring down Anwar, regardless of the cost to our distressed nation that is in desperate need of healing, stability and economic reform and rejuvenation.

Malaysians are stunned to see how far he would go - even falling back on the sickening tried and tested formula of using race and religion.

Without batting an eyelid, he contradicts himself, negating his previous grand policies like Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia. He can spout remarks like "the Chinese are rich and the Malays are poor", and make unfounded, nonsensical claims that non-Malays want to change Tanah Melayu to something more multiethnic, and has even showed his contempt for the royalty.

Is this really what Dr Mahathir thinks of the country's non-Malay citizens, that we're cunning and rapacious interlopers who have stolen the nation's wealth?

With the impending elections in six states, Dr M thinks he can still be the grand puppet master and pull the strings to bring the government down. This we cannot allow to happen. We citizens must show that using race and religion as fear- and loathing-inducing tactics no longer work on us whether deployed by Dr M or any other politician.

As for his assertion that we identify ourselves as Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian Indian while Malays are just Malaysians - really?

Well, I recall Dr M's current political partner, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, stating he was a Malay first (and presumably Malaysian second). But why would a Malay need to state his race when that is already enshrined in his nation's name? That's why south of Johor, they have to call themselves Singapore Malays.

But does Dr M know that when we are abroad, we identify ourselves as Malaysians, never Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian Indian?

We don't feel the need for outsiders to know our ethnic origins which is our homegrown obsession born from our divisive politics and policies.

Despite my hurt and disappointment, I do not wish Dr M ill, especially since he turned 98 on Monday. I only wish he would heed what revered military strategist Sun Tzu said: "Of all the stratagems, to know when to quit is the best."

And I am relieved I won't be the one writing his obituary any more.

The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.