

A CONSUMMATE WRITER WHO INSPIRED

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Dr Mahathir had a profound impact in shaping how Malaysia thinks about leadership, race, development and dissent. **ELENA KOSHY** writes

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad celebrates his 100th birthday today — a milestone few leaders live to see, let alone from the front row of a nation they helped shape.

For Malaysians who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, he was a constant presence. He told the nation to Look East, and we did, launched the first national car and laid out the bold vision of Wawasan 2020. For a time, Malaysia felt unstoppable.

His impact on Malaysia remains profound — not just in policy and infrastructure, but also in shaping how the nation thinks about leadership, race, development and dissent.

Apart from being an astute politician, Dr Mahathir has always been a consummate writer. And if he were still penning weekly columns today, Malaysians would be debating his every word until the cows come home — and still walk away divided.

As it is, even now at 100, every word he utters still sparks headlines, stirrings and no shortage of controversy. Some listen, some roll their eyes — but almost no one ignores him.

In 1947, as a young medical student, he earned his first byline in the *Sunday Times* with an article titled “Malay Women Make Their Own Freedom” — a signal that his politics would always be accompanied by a powerful command of narrative.

That piece, written under the pen name “C.H.E. Det” — a stylised nod to Encik Mahathir — argued for expanding women’s roles beyond domestic boundaries.

“It is up to the men, and especially the fathers, to realise that they can no longer confine their womenfolk to the kitchen,” he wrote.

It signalled an early awareness of how language could influence attitudes — the beginning of a lifelong habit of using writing to reflect, persuade and provoke.



Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's early writings covered academic reform, rural upliftment and gender equality.

This marked the start of a long, informal relationship with the *New Straits Times* and its predecessor publications, where Dr Mahathir's articles would span decades. From social critique to policy commentary and political reflection, his writings built more than arguments — they became part of Malaysia's evolving conversation with itself.

Dr Mahathir continued to write — and shape the national story — long after he stepped into and out of political office. Over the decades, he authored more than a dozen books, from *The Malay Dilemma* to *A Doctor in the House*, and most recently, *Capturing Hope*.

His blog, thechedet.com, has become a digital platform for his unfiltered views on everything from race relations to international diplomacy.

Dr Mahathir's early writings covered more than gender equality. In a 1948 article titled “Malays and the Higher Education”, he wrote: “The kampong folk must be made to realise that the salvation of their children and hence their race lies in education.”

In “Ronggeng is Popular” (Sept 1, 1949), Dr Mahathir reflects on traditional Malay dance with a mix of nostalgia and moral concern, valuing culture only when it aligns with discipline

and national goals.

This perspective shapes much of his writing, from affectionate yet reform-minded depictions of rural life (“Rains Bring Fish to Sawahs”, Feb 6, 1949; “Picnic Time in the Dusun”, Jan 23, 1949) to early advocacy for women's education, cultural preservation, academic reform (“Disparities: Helpful suggestions needed”, March 9, 1968) and rural upliftment (“Plight of Malay fisherfolk”, April 23, 1950). Not poetic, but always clear — Dr Mahathir's voice was ahead of its time.

For all his contradictions, Dr Mahathir remains an invaluable chronicler of Malaysian political thought. Few leaders have writ-

ten as prolifically — or as persistently — across decades.

Through books, columns, letters and his blog, he has documented not just policies, but the shifting moods, fears and ambitions of a nation in transition.

Now, as he turns 100 and the *New Straits Times* marks 180 years of chronicling the nation's story, the parallels are hard to ignore. Both have watched Malaysia rise, stumble, grow and grapple with its identity. But unlike most politicians, Dr Mahathir never waited for history to pass judgment.

He wrote the first draft himself.