

Kissinger cables: 'Chauvinist' Dr Mahathir disliked by non-Malay community
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 9 — The US Embassy in Malaysia expressed its surprise over Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's appointment as deputy prime minister back in 1976, in a series of recently declassified US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks yesterday.

According to the cables from Henry Kissinger's run as US Secretary of State, the embassy considered the then education minister as a "Malay chauvinist" despite admiring his modern outlook on politics.

"Mahathir (picture) has a reputation as an extremely capable man ... and is considered to have a relatively clean record on corruption," said Francis T. Underhill Jr, the ambassador posted between 1973 and 1977, in his confidential analysis of Malaysia's then new Cabinet.

After Tun Abdul Razak Hussein died in 1975, the ailing Tun Hussein Onn was forced to choose a successor in the form of a deputy prime minister between three preferred candidates — Dr Mahathir, former Malacca chief minister the late Tun Ghafar Baba, and Kelantan businessman from a royal lineage Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

The three Umno men were elected vice-presidents at the party's general assembly, and Razak ran the risk of displeasing Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj if he chose Dr Mahathir, who had previously been expelled from Umno for criticising the first prime minister.

According to the cables, Razak also considered the late Tun Ghazali Shafie despite his loss in the Umno vice-presidency race because of Dr Mahathir's reputation as a Malay chauvinist and apathy felt by some in the Chinese community towards the minister.

"So far, the Chinese reaction of Mahathir's nomination has been, if not enthusiastic, at least not characterised by vehement opposition," Underhill noted.

"The small, predominantly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) has expressed some concern over Mahathir's past record but has not openly opposed his selection. Other Chinese parties or politicians have either not commented or have welcomed Mahathir's appointment in a pro forma manner."

The embassy had expressed its admiration for Dr Mahathir when he was appointed as education minister two years before, as noted in another confidential analysis.

"On domestic side, appointment of Dr Mahathir bin Mohamed as Education Minister, very apt in view of Mahathir's intellectual abilities and good reputation as administrator and moderniser, was note-worthy but non-Malay community is likely to consider him a Malay chauvinist (undeservedly in embassy's view).

"Mahathir's appointment was however tempered by designation of MCA secretary-general Chan Siang Sun as deputy minister," Underhill wrote.

Dr Mahathir has been a vocal supporter of Malay rights since his early days in politics, where he wrote a letter calling on Tunku Abdul Rahman to resign for failing to uphold Malay rights.

He also wrote a book called "The Malay Dilemma" in 1970, where he espoused affirmative action to enable Malays to compete with the more economically-dominant Chinese.

Affirmative action became a recurring theme in the administration of Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister as Dr Mahathir continued the New Economic Policy (NEP) with the National Development Policy (NDP) in 1990.

He continues to be a vocal Malay rights advocate after leaving office, and currently serves as the patron and adviser for Malay supremacy group Perkasa

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