

MALAYSIA AND MAHATHIR: THE DOCTOR IS STILL IN THE HOUSE

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By Super Admin

The revival of populist former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad comes at a price for the people of Malaysia.

Joyce Lee, The Diplomat

Mahathir Mohamad received a hero's welcome at the Bersih 4.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur this weekend, swept up in a groundswell of yellow t-shirts and vuvuzela horns. On Saturday, he stopped by to urge protestors to continue, before being ushered away by his bodyguards. The next day, the 90-year-old former prime minister visited again to [give](#) an impromptu press conference, mobbed by journalists and elated citizens. He used the opportunity to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Razak, in light of a nasty corruption scandal, a debt-saddled state development fund, and a plummeting ringgit.

Coverage of Mahathir's surprise appearance at the 34-hour rally would be remiss if it overlooked the hypocrisy of the moment. The former leader is widely acknowledged for his authoritarian leadership style, as well as for his penchant for attacking critics and political challengers with scathing words and detention orders. Bersih – a movement that advocates fair elections, the right to protest, a transparent government, a stronger parliamentary democracy, and economic reform – hardly ranks on Mahathir's long list of hobbies (horse-riding and woodworking among them).

Most post-rally articles commented lightly on Mahathir's apparent change of heart; domestic media in Malaysia focused on the political blowback from former colleagues in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, which has led the coalition government since Malaysia's independence in 1957. But coverage has missed the context of Mahathir's full 22 years in office (1981-2003), particularly the self-reflection that beset his later years as prime minister. More crucially, it has overlooked the implications of his participation for the future of political reform in Malaysia.

The Rise of People Power

[Bersih](#) was born in 2005, two years after Mahathir left office as Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister. The movement, named after the word "clean" in Malay, originally comprised a committee pushing for specific electoral reforms, such as adopting indelible ink in voting processes. Driven by the largest opposition parties and a few civil society groups, the first rally was staged in 2007 ahead of the general elections. As Bersih widened its membership to include 84 non-governmental organizations, its demands expanded: Bersih 2.0 in 2011 campaigned to end

corruption and money politics, while Bersih 3.0 in 2012 demanded the Electoral Commission resign. Each rally was denied a permit, ending in a violent spate of arrests and confrontations between the police and protestors, some involving tear gas and water cannons.

Two general elections later, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional coalition is still in power. Although it lost the popular vote in 2013, it held onto its parliamentary majority through conspicuous [gerrymandering](#) and reported phantom voting. The political imbroglio currently engulfing Najib's office has sharpened public grievances against the government, already high amid tepid oil prices and the introduction of GST earlier this year. In July, a money trail surfaced, documenting almost \$700 million deposited into Najib's personal bank accounts. The prime minister's legitimacy gap widened further that month after he replaced the deputy prime minister and four other ministers. He also dismissed the attorney-general leading one of the corruption investigations into 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), the state development fund with more than US\$11 billion in debt (Malaysian social media [compared](#) the move with the "Red Wedding" massacre from book and television series *Game of Thrones*). Najib, who chairs 1MDB's advisory board and also holds the portfolio of finance minister, denies any wrongdoing.

Like that old Russian joke ("...and then it got worse"), public ire at the corruption allegations, cabinet shuffle, and barefaced co-option or marginalization of those meant to hold the executive accountable intensified as the ringgit took a plunge in August. Weakening to levels last experienced during the Asian financial crisis, the ringgit depreciated to 4.2 against the U.S. dollar by the end of the month; analysts [estimate](#) 26 percent depreciation against the dollar peak-to-trough over the last year. As the corruption investigations continue, GDP growth, government bond prices, and investor confidence remain low.

Much of Malaysia's economic woes are beyond Najib's control, notably the knock-on effects of flagging Chinese demand and the devaluation of the yuan. But his obstinacy – threatening legal action against media outlets, warning Muslim Malays they would be *bangsat* (somewhere between "destitute" and "pariahs of the lowest order") without UMNO – and the [spendthrift](#) ways of his much-maligned wife Rosmah have made it easier to accredit the nation's problems to the prime minister.

Consequently, Bersih 4.0 was scheduled for this year and Najib's resignation from public office added to its list of demands. The peaceful rally this past weekend took place in cities around the world, drawing enormous crowds of 50,000, [according](#) to the deputy home minister, or 500,000, by the organizers' [count](#), to the capital. It was staged on the eve of Malaysia's *merdeka* ("independence") celebrations, prompting Najib to reaffirm the necessity of national unity. The *merdeka* celebrations were a nationalistic affair involving song, dance, an air show, and a military parade complete with soldiers in ghillie suits, all presided over by the prime minister and

the king. But even combined with an UMNO [pledge](#) for a counter-rally in October and a recent [spike](#) in oil prices, the display was not enough to staunch a blooming wound.

Quo vadis, Mahathir?

Mahathir gave Bersih 4.0 a boost of energy and a vote of confidence. He is one of the loudest voices pushing for Najib's resignation, echoing his turn on another protégé, Abdullah Badawi, who took office after Mahathir stepped down. When Badawi began implementing structural reforms, including an end to the large-scale projects favored by his predecessor, Mahathir publicly voiced regret about Badawi's leadership and accused him of corruption. Badawi resigned in 2008, making way for Najib – with Mahathir's blessing.

Before attending the demonstrations on Saturday, Mahathir gave a speech at an event called, "Malaysia today: Where are we heading?" The question is one he has raised often, from his 1970 work *The Malay Dilemma* to his 1986 *The Challenge*, in which one chapter asks "Quo Vadis Malaysia?" Bersih offers the beginnings of a signpost to the nation. Why does the Malaysian audience seem to wait for Mahathir's direction?

The "father of modern Malaysia" has never truly left the political scene; his reach goes farther still, spanning the institutional, ideological, and emotional. Mahathir created the country's foremost think tank, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, in 1983 to bypass a bloated public sector while retaining control over policymaking. His portraits and honorary degrees decorate the walls of the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya, the federal capital he designed to centralize government administration in an orderly planned city. Every Proton vehicle on the road is a reminder of his national car project, launched to boost industrialization and Malay entrepreneurship. In his hometown of Alor Setar, he was the first Malay doctor to set up a medical clinic. He is generally beloved by the *bumiputra* ("sons of the soil", namely Malays and other indigenous peoples), who compose the bulk of UMNO's support base.

Mahathir's populist slant, however, comes with a razor-sharp edge. After declaring support for people power on Saturday, the next day he [clarified](#), "I'm here not because I support Bersih but because I support the people." He limited his demands to a parliamentary vote of no confidence against Najib, a far cry from Bersih 4.0's sweeping reforms. He declared that "no more avenue for legal redress" remained, failing to acknowledge his own role in dismantling the judiciary in 1988. The emotions his appearance elicited among the *rakyat* ("people") – delight that the architect of the establishment was joining them on the streets, bemusement in bumping shoulders with the elder statesman on the public light rail train to the rally – risk clouding a legacy of autocratic measures.

In 1987, as public disaffection with government cronyism and mega-projects rose, UMNO split into two factions. Mahathir's administration faced legal suits for electoral fraud and the awarding of a highway contract. The response was unambiguous: In October, 119 individuals were arrested under the Internal Security Act, including members of coalition and opposition parties, religious groups, trade unions, environmental groups, and anti-nuclear waste activist groups. Public assemblies were banned, and three newspapers' publishing licenses revoked. The extraordinary measure, named Operation Lalang, represented the prime minister's threat perceptions writ large. The year marked the only instance from 1970 to 2013 that operating costs for internal security [surpassed](#) those for defense.

Another political maelstrom struck during the Asian financial crisis in 1998. With patronage networks increasingly conspicuous and the ringgit rapidly depreciating, Mahathir attacked foreign currency speculators and bodies like the International Monetary Fund. The vulnerable moment exacerbated a rift with his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. In September, Anwar was expelled from UMNO; allegations against him of sodomy, corruption, and leaking state secrets to foreign agents followed. Pro-Anwar supporters, part of the *Reformasi* ("reform") movement, were criticized for their mob-law and collaboration with the enemy.

It would be easy to dismiss Mahathir's recent endorsement of people power as political showmanship. But his stance is best viewed in the context of a long-tail reflective period that began late in his tenure. In 2002, he [commented](#) on Malaysia's "truly incompatible mix" of races, and told coalition members that racial integration had failed. His longstanding compulsion to uplift the Malays, embodied in educational policies, discursive appeals for their modernization – the post-colonial transformation proposed in *The Challenge* – and guiding concepts like *Melayu Baru* ("new Malay") went unfulfilled. He [admitted](#) failure in 2014, calling the Malays lazy and inciting considerable backlash. The bitterness that now imbues his rhetoric may have prompted him to seek allies among former adversaries.

Although disappointment with his policies' outcomes has tempered his confidence, the elder Mahathir continues to diagnose the country's ills. In so doing, his co-option of the demonstrations to increase the pressure on Najib sidelines Bersih's most fundamental demands: fair elections, the right to dissent, active civic engagement, and a freer media. As the dust settles on Bersih 4.0, Mahathir has not become a true believer in reform. The *rakyat* should not mistake him for one.

Playing with Fireworks

The post-rally spotlight on Mahathir's advocacy of people power casts in shadow a history of opposition to it. Beyond this, Najib loyalists are [seizing](#) on this moment of hypocrisy to lighten their share of the blame for the country's woes.

Two things are clear: First, this is no about-face by the former prime minister. Despite his frustration with Najib's office and his own setbacks, Mahathir is not relaxing his mandate to steer Malaysia nor his stance on civic freedoms. "Not many dictators announce their resignation," he quipped in a recent [interview](#) with Chris Wright, recalling his voluntary decision in 2002 to step down. And yet since leaving office, he has sought to maintain his luster and authority, actively exercising them to define the nation's best interests.

Second, the focus on Mahathir and his call to oust Najib eclipses the systemic reforms demanded by Bersih. According too much due to the former leader – whose prescription is to save UMNO by ejecting Najib – compromises the growing popular movement and narrows its field of vision to the prime minister's office instead of the far-reaching problems crippling Malaysia's democracy, such as money politics and curbs on civic freedoms. Mahathir's legacy, bombast, and authority in Malaysia allow him to fuel many a fire, from Anwar's alleged transgressions to Badawi's resignation. His public statements and blog posts still blanket domestic media, more than a decade after leaving office. But his contradictions make him a liability as much as an asset. Mahathir's presence may have ignited the crowd at Bersih 4.0, but protesters should take caution in handling a combustible element.

Joyce Lee is currently a master's student at the London School of Economics, completing a dual degree in international affairs between PKU and LSE.

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