

Cornered in the city he built, Mahathir defends his legacies

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By Abdar Rahman Koya

He says money was well spent on the mega projects that characterised his rule.

PUTRAJAYA: In some ways, one can draw similarities between Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Shah Jahan, the 17th century Mughal emperor who gave the world the Taj Mahal.

Both men relocated their administrative capitals. Shah Jahan moved his from Agra to Delhi and Mahathir from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya, the construction of which marked the pinnacle of his 22-year rule.

In his last days, Shah Jahan was held captive by his successor, in a building whose windows overlooked the Taj Mahal, his labour of love which continues to attract millions of visitors.

That is not to say that Mahathir, 92, is held captive. Yet, in some ways, it does look like he has been sidelined, relegated to one quiet part of Putrajaya.

Sitting on a sleepy corner of the 50 sq km city he built is the Perdana Leadership Foundation, his post-prime ministerial abode. He has been spending a good part of his days there since 2003.

Because he loomed large over the construction of Putrajaya, the roads to the foundation building are paved with memories of him. When told of this, the former leader put up a strong defence of all his projects, claiming he was justified in spending public funds on them.

These projects include not only Putrajaya, but also the Petronas Twin Towers, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Proton and the F1 racing circuit in Sepang, just to name a few of the landmarks whose constructions he closely supervised.

“They were all done within our capacity,” the man who once dominated Malaysian public life said in a recent interview with FMT.

Today, Mahathir finds himself on the opposition's side, trying to mobilise support to unseat Najib Razak, who now occupies Seri Perdana, the seat of power in Putrajaya.

Even then, Mahathir has no regrets for building Putrajaya just as he has no regrets for many of the infrastructure that characterised his rule.

"Many of the things that are done are based on returns, not done to please the people or to become popular," he said.

He admitted having to borrow money to fund the construction of projects close to his heart, but said the amounts were small from a business point of view.

"If at all we borrowed, it was very small, never reached RM1 billion, and the money was used for something that is productive, either directly or indirectly," he said, when it was pointed out to him that two of his legacies, Proton and the Sepang Formula One race, were now officially considered not sustainable financially and headed to oblivion.

On his spacious desk were two large calculators, an indication that Mahathir is always preparing to meet criticism of his fiscal policies with numbers.

Sure enough, the numbers followed almost immediately.

"We spent RM230 million," he said of the Sepang International Circuit situated a few kilometres away, which will host the final F1 race, the event it was built for, this October.

That amount, said Mahathir, was small if one took into account the value of the returns. "The F1 race is covered for three days, and for hours and hours, over 300 TV stations all over the world show it. The value of that advertisement runs into billions of ringgit."

Last month, Najib announced that Malaysia's contract to host the F1 race would be ended due to "lowering returns to the country compared to the cost of hosting the championships".

But Mahathir said the returns to the investment far outweighed the cost of hosting the race.

"If you want to have a three-minute show in Japan on one TV station, it will cost you a million ringgit. But here they do it for free for three whole days showing Malaysia. That value is important to build more visits from tourists.

"Yes, we have to put in some money. But the returns are far greater than what we spent."

He said the same was true with many of his other projects.

Mahathir said his successors were now continuing on what he built, but not in a way that would reap benefits.

He cited as an example the East Cost Rail Line (ECRL), a 600-km rail link connecting the Klang Valley with Kelantan, undertaken by China Construction Communications Company with a price tag of about RM55 billion.

Mahathir is not convinced the mega project being promoted by Najib would be sustainable.

When asked why, he offered a prediction: "It's going to lose money for the next 30 years."

According to him, there is no money in railways.

"Even in the west coast, you can't make money with railways. You are going to borrow RM55 billion to build a railway. What for? People want to use the roads," said Mahathir, who during his time saw the construction of major roads such as the North-South Highway running through the length of the peninsula and a 13-km bridge which for the first time linked Penang to the mainland.

But isn't the doomsday prediction on ECRL coming from the same man who some two decades ago justified the need for KLIA, a super large airport whose debut at the height of the Asian economic crisis prompted criticism that it was a white elephant?

When reminded of this, Mahathir said critics at the time failed to understand the exponential growth of the aviation industry. "If you build another small airport, once it grows, you have no place to go. To get land for an airport is very difficult."

And then, more numbers.

"We reserved 25,000 acres of land for the new airport. Look at the growth. We opened the airport in 1998. In about 20 years, the growth went from 18 million to 42 million passengers.

"We can operate up to 125 million passengers. Forget about trying to find another place for the airport. Maybe, if you want to service Kuala Lumpur, you may have to put the airport in Terengganu because there's no more land here.

"If you cannot look forward, then you cannot plan forward."

We thanked Mahathir for his time and, as we walked out of his room, we chanced upon a petite lady walking in the corridor. "I am scared of all this," said a friendly Dr Siti Hasmah Ali, who after greeting us with a smile, disappeared into a nearby room.

Mahathir may be pushed to one corner of Putrajaya, observing his legacy from the windows of his "retirement" abode. But unlike Shah Jahan in captivity, the old man refuses to let anyone push away his legacies.

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