

Mahathir knows best
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Sholto Byrnes defends the Malaysian Prime Minister against his many enemies in the West

An outburst from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is, like the appearance of rainclouds over Kuala Lumpur, an unpredictable but regular event. Soon the sun comes out again and life goes on as normal. The Malaysian Prime Minister has a long history of disengaging the diplomatic filter before opening his mouth to pronounce on matters concerning relations with other countries. Some may remember his exchange with Bob Hawke in 1986, when the Australian leader condemned the hanging in Malaysia of two drug traffickers as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised'. 'The Australians,' replied Dr M, 'are descendants of convicts'. More recently, needled over Western attacks on the jailing of his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, on trumped-up charges of sodomy, Mahathir aimed a barb at Ben Bradshaw, then a junior Foreign Office minister. 'The British people accept homosexual ministers, he said. 'but if they ever come here bringing their boyfriends along, we will throw them out!'

Such comments made in the face of criticism from ex-colonial powers which, to Mahathir's mind, have no business telling Malaysians how to conduct their affairs, should not be taken literally. It's clear he relishes confrontation with those who act as though they were his superiors; proudly, he won't take it. and good for him.

His most devoted admirers, however, had difficulty explaining away his remarks last week at the OIC, a conference of Islamic nations. '1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews,' he said. 'Today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them.' One may suggest that such sentiments are, unfortunately, commonplace in many Muslim countries where the pot of resentment over the Palestinian question constantly simmers. One may point out that the vast majority of his speech, hardly reported here, was a call for peaceful unity among Muslims and a condemnation of violence. One may feel sure that the real target of his ire was Israel and Zionist Jews (in another part of his speech he said 'Even among the Jews there are many who do not approve of what the Israelis are doing') rather than, say, the likes of Amos Oz or Shimon Peres.

But the taint of anti-Semitism cannot be completely wiped away (if at all, some might say) and this, along with his comments about homosexuals and what are perceived to be his dictatorial tendencies, led the BBC's grande dame, John Simpson, to call Mahathir 'a kind of successful Asian Robert Mugabe' at the weekend. The comparison is ridiculous. Or perhaps the 'liberator of Kabul' thinks he would be welcomed if he offered to perform the same service for Kuala Lumpur?

I think not. And it is a shoddy and stupid label to give a man who has transformed Malaysia economically, opened up its constitution, kept the peace in a country once riven by racial riots, and who ought to be acclaimed by the West as the very model of a moderate Muslim leader.

His 22-year period of office has seen Malaysian standards of living soar to among the highest in South-east Asia, and Kuala Lumpur transformed into a modern, dynamic city; the Petronas twin towers are staggeringly beautiful, an emblem of the capital's success. During the financial crisis of 1997 Mahathir confounded critics of his capital controls and fixed-exchange-rate policy when Malaysia emerged from it in far better shape than many other countries in the region, winning plaudits from economists such as Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz. Then he stood alone, but he also stood the conventional wisdom of the IMF on its head, as it later had to acknowledge. Did the West know best then?

Far too little credit has been given to Mahathir the reformer, not least in his dealings with the sultans who rule nine of the 13 states and who elect the Agong, or king, from among themselves. The country's founding father and first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Ratunan, once said of them: 'If they're too troublesome we'll turn them into the King of Hearts, the King of Clubs, the King of Spades and the King of Diamonds'. Possibly because he was from a royal house himself, however, the Tunku never did anything about their constitutional privileges, which had allowed miscreant princelings to get away with bullying, assault and rape. They were above the law, and they (or at least the Agong) could block any law from being passed. Both these rights were removed by Mahathir.

Even such impeccably anti-feudal actions will not, I realise, be enough to convince those who write him off as a dictator. It's fair to say that his idea of democracy is somewhat different from that favoured by Europeans. Only recently, he said, 'In some countries

sleeping naked on the beach as a sign of protest is considered democracy — if that is democracy then this is not needed.' There is not the same freedom of the press or right to assembly that we take for granted. But during his time in office Mahathir has been challenged, and once nearly defeated, in open elections for his UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) party, which was actually declared illegal at one point (he got over that by promptly founding and registering a new version). Two northern states, Kelantan and Terangganu, are ruled by PAS, an opposition fundamentalist Islamic party. As Dr M points out. In some countries the opposition cannot win, but we are not like that.'

The likes of Simpson do not appreciate what a delicate balancing act Mahathir has had to perform. The Tunku (whose criticisms of Mahathir are there for all to see in the museum dedicated to his memory) was content for the Malays to have political power and the Chinese the economic. Realising that the relative impoverishment of the Malays, whom Mahathir has often chided for their sloth, would provide fertile breeding grounds for religious extremism, a positive-discrimination programme in favour of the bumiputras (sons of the soil) has lifted the Malays, while the political process has been opened, slowly, to the Chinese.

Above all, Mahathir should be lauded for continually espousing a moderate form of Islam, for applying the sharia (and a very light form of it at that) only to Muslims, and chiding extremists for perverting the religion for their own ends. It would have been so easy for him to play to the constituency that PAS is exploiting ever more successfully. But the cost would have been increased racial tension and the relinquishing of any idea of a new Malaysia encompassing many ethnic groups and religions.

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