

## **Mahathir, closet westerner**

**As Malaysia's prime minister prepares for an election, his attacks on the West intensify. Yet he himself copies some of the worst practices of western politicians**

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IT HAS been a tough year, but Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's prime minister, is still sitting pretty. When his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), held its annual meeting last June, there were rumours that he might be on his way out after 17 years in power. Supporters of Anwar Ibrahim, his popular deputy, believed a well-managed chorus of complaints would persuade Dr Mahathir to step aside, just as President Suharto had done a month before in neighbouring Indonesia. But he did not budge. Within three months, Mr Anwar had been sacked and arrested. In April, he was convicted of abusing his office to cover up a sex scandal and sent to prison for six years.

So when UMNO gathered again last weekend, Dr Mahathir remained its unchallenged leader. He celebrated this by lashing out at his perceived enemies, especially "foreign colonialists and their puppets in Malaysia", who, he said, were out to weaken the country. He warned supporters to be particularly wary of "ethnic Europeans", many of whom "are of the opinion that Muslim people cannot succeed, more so when their skin colour is brown."

This was not the first time Dr Mahathir had railed against dastardly foreigners. He blamed foreign currency-traders for Malaysia's financial collapse in 1997, saying many of them were Jewish. He has accused western journalists of trying to bring down his government. He has consistently complained that foreign bond-rating agencies are out to hurt the country economically. And he has revelled in his defiance of the IMF—the embodiment of all things big, bad and western.

Few people treat these remarks as any sort of call to arms. Foreign diplomats and investors are quick to argue that Dr Mahathir is aiming at a domestic audience, and find his antics slightly amusing. Many Malaysians, too, refuse to take his remarks very seriously. Given the 73-year-old prime minister's long stint in office, and his shrinking support among urban and educated Malays, it is tempting to treat his tirades as the ramblings of an ageing politician. That, however, would be a mistake.

Dr Mahathir's anti-western bombshells may be clumsy, but his political arsenal also contains some sophisticated weaponry, much of it of western design. His presentation of economic policy, his manipulation of international institutions for domestic advantage and his ability to portray rivals as extremists are tactics that might be adopted by Bill Clinton or Britain's Tony Blair.

And he is good at it. Dr Mahathir has led UMNO and its ruling coalition to four victories since he took over in 1981, and clearly intends to vindicate himself by winning another, probably soon. Since Malaysia is in effect a one-coalition system, Dr Mahathir has found it easier than his western counterparts to win elections. Nevertheless, his populist instincts have helped.

Consider the economy. Like all skilled politicians, Dr Mahathir is adept at taking credit for the good times and blaming the bad times on others. Thus the crisis itself was bought on by foreign speculators and perpetuated by the mismanagement of his finance minister—Mr Anwar, who followed the IMF's advice. A property bubble, an overvalued currency and government-sanctioned investment splurges had nothing to do with it. Similarly, the economy's rebound—GDP shrunk by 1.3% in the first quarter but is expected to grow by 1-2%—will be attributed to Dr Mahathir's wise and courageous management, especially his decision to defy international consensus by adopting currency controls last September.

Never mind that the controls were imposed after the local currency, the ringgit, had bottomed out or that the IMF's star pupils, Thailand and South Korea, are recovering without any such controls. Those things matter if people are evaluating Malaysia's economic policies rationally. But few people in Malaysia are. Dr Mahathir has deftly changed the subject.

The prime minister has also been able to portray himself as a centrist statesman, constantly moderating the competing demands of extremist rivals, a tactic Mr Clinton would refer to as “triangulation”. The hints are sometimes subtle but they are relentless. If people vote for the opposition Democratic Action Party, which draws its support from Malaysia's Chinese minority (30% of the population), it could lead to a revival of the race riots that erupted in 1969. Choose the Islamic Party of Malaysia, and women will find themselves out of work and in headscarves.

Dr Mahathir has thus been effective at persuading people to vote for UMNO's ruling coalition. In a thoroughly western way the prime minister has relied on these popularity contests to justify his decisions. Yet voters in Malaysia also face fewer choices than those in developed democracies.

The Malaysian prime minister faces few real limits to his power, which until now has allowed him both to dominate the UMNO coalition and prevent strong rival coalitions from emerging. The local media are toothless: editors and journalists cheered the UMNO speakers on last weekend. The independence of the courts is widely questioned. As Mr Anwar discovered, in Malaysia it does not pay to question the country's leader. That is why Dr Mahathir's blend of western politics and Asian strong-man is so potent.

The opposition is determined to change all this at the next election, which must be called within a year. Mr Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Ismail, has started a new party, the National Justice Party. This week it was planning to carve up constituencies with some of the opposition—just as UMNO does with its coalition partners. But even if they can come to such an arrangement, their chances of defeating UMNO are slim. Their best hope may be to stop the ruling party winning a huge majority, which might just weaken Dr Mahathir's popularity and encourage party officials to challenge him. But Dr Mahathir can see that risk. Expect him to deploy his entire arsenal in the coming months—anti-western explosives and all.

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