

The dream and the summit

New Straits Times

November 25, 2020

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DR. Mahathir Mohamad is said to have a dream. The former Malaysian prime minister is personally perhaps never a stickler for pomp and ceremony and prefers a simple lifestyle. But he does keenly recognize the crucial and often irreplaceable role that spectacles and edifices can play in the development and nation-building process, especially for developing countries such as Malaysia. For one, he ushered Malaysia from a mainly agricultural economy into a mostly industrial one with a albeit previously struggling national car manufacturing industry to boot.

He also engineered the relocation of Malaysia's governmental administrative center from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya a few dozen miles away. When the spanking new capital was filling up with resplendent and imposing new buildings for the various ministries in the late 1990s, Dr Mahathir decided to present its magnificence and Malaysia's many accomplishments to the world, albeit amidst the economic downturn brought about by the then raging Asian financial crisis.

For it was then Malaysia's turn to host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. Like all Southeast Asian nations which are ever gracious and generous hosts to their esteemed guests, Malaysia pulled out all the stops in laying out the red carpet for the dignitaries and their

delegations hailing from around two dozen economies around the Pacific Rim.

An otherwise stern old-timer politician skilled in backroom politicking, Dr Mahathir nevertheless always keeps a sharp eye out for the latest technological advances and trends. Besides Putrajaya, he also promoted the nearby, equally sparkling Cyberjaya as a potential hub for the dotcom wannabes worldwide, with promises of tax breaks and incentives aplenty. The formal photo-op for the APEC leaders was also held in the garden of a newly built nearby resort.

But it was alas not all glamor at the auspicious occasion. Weeks earlier, Dr Mahathir was embroiled in a power struggle which saw him fire his erstwhile protégé, deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim from the cabinet. Anwar was subsequently jailed after having forged in a short time a civil-society protest movement called reformasi. During the APEC summit, US Vice President Al Gore openly praised the reformasi movement, much to the displeasure of Dr. Mahathir.

In any case, a few years earlier, Dr Mahathir had also propounded his Vision 2020, of making Malaysia a developed nation by 2020. Since then, it was widely conjectured that Dr Mahathir would very much like to see Malaysia host the APEC summit again in 2020, this time showcasing the nation's coming of age as a developed nation. And indeed by rotation among the participating APEC economies, Malaysia was supposed to play host again this year.

In the years since, much has changed politically in Malaysia. Dr. Mahathir stepped down as prime minister for the first time five years after Malaysia first hosted the APEC summit. But the ever alert senior statesman was not content with being just a retiree, especially when he was allegedly hugely

disappointed by the performance of his two successors. So much so that he decided to come out of retirement and enter active politics again five years ago.

By that time, Anwar had left jail and led the opposition coalition to make huge dents in successive elections on the ruling coalition's parliamentary majority. However he did not manage to topple the government, and was jailed again. As they faced common political enemies, Dr Mahathir and Anwar decided to make up, at least temporarily, their political differences and fought in a common opposition front. There was supposedly a political agreement between the two whereby if their coalition won the general election, Dr Mahathir would become the prime minister again for a while to warm the seat for Anwar to take over.

And their coalition did win the 2018 Malaysian general election, with Dr Mahathir becoming the prime minister for a second time. Once again the political cleavage between these two political juggernauts emerged. Anwar was extremely anxious to become prime minister, making all the noises both within and outside the country. Dr Mahathir, on the other hand, did not appear at all willing to pass on the leadership baton to Anwar. His answers to questions on this momentous matter was always coy and non-committal. Meanwhile, the preparations for Malaysia to once again host the APEC summit went full steam, while speculations abounded that Dr Mahathir would finally step down again after the summit, having fulfilled his dream of seeing Malaysia through to its developed-nation glory.

But when Anwar pushed Dr Mahathir again earlier this year for a firm timeline for handing over the premiership, Dr Mahathir, to the surprise of many, abruptly resigned as prime minister. He was perhaps convinced of his political irreplaceability and invincibility, that politicians from both sides of the political divide would have to eventually come and entreat him to remain as prime minister, and this time on his own terms,

unencumbered by Anwar's incessant handover demands. But this time, Dr Mahathir perhaps overplayed his political hand. Instead of himself being reappointed or Anwar appointed as prime minister, his party deputy Muhyiddin Yassin was given the mandate to form a new government. Undaunted, Dr Mahathir continued to try to topple Muhyiddin and obstruct Anwar at the same time, a daunting political feat that perhaps only the larger-than-life personality of Dr Mahathir could undertake.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic is raging across the world and back, destroying lives and livelihoods on its trail. The red carpets for the APEC dignitaries would have to be rolled up and sanitized. Not surprisingly, the summit, like many other similar high-level gatherings, was held online. But US President Donald Trump decided to make a last-minute appearance at the event. The summit issued a Putrajaya 2040 Declaration, with main points on free trade, innovation and inclusive growth, all very worthy and lofty goals, especially in the aftermath of a world devastated by the pandemic. It will be another two decades before Malaysia hosts the summit again, and hopefully by then, all APEC economies would indeed advance into developed status. Dr Mahathir's dream would then be more than fulfilled.

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Source: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/11/25/opinion/columnists/the-dream-and-the-summit/801168/>