

Malaysia Under Mahathir

Cell Phone from Kuala Lumpur: TIME's Simon Elegant on the 20-year rule of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad

BY NICK PAPADOPOULOS

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Mahathir Mohamad, the 75-year-old often-controversial leader of Malaysia, marked his 20th anniversary in office on Monday with a low-key party -- if you call a dinner for 25,000 people low-key. TIMEasia.com editor Nick Papadopoulos spoke to TIME Southeast Asia correspondent Simon Elegant about Malaysia under Mahathir. Edited excerpts:

How did Mahathir and Malays celebrate this impressive achievement?

Mahathir cut a cake in Parliament and then that evening in Malacca -- and this is bizarre but appropriate for Mahathir because of his strange lust for records, and it personifies this Malaysian "can do" spirit -- he hosted Malaysia's biggest ever sit-down dinner. People from the Guinness Book of Records were in attendance; it's estimated 25,000 people were at this dinner. They had to bus people in from all government departments, the party faithful from the ruling coalition. Mahathir didn't really make much of a speech, but the bizarre and most interesting part of the evening was when he arrived. The crowd, while they weren't hostile, appeared indifferent ... It's not that they disliked him, but despite the efforts of some people who tried to work the crowd, they just didn't pay much attention. It was kind of eerie.

Has Mahathir been good for Malaysia?

Mahathir's great strength has been his managing of the economic crisis and his decision to go against conventional wisdom. My feeling is that that worked pretty well and it protected Malaysia. The jury is still out for a lot of people, but the feeling among many is that his driving of the export economy over the last 20 years is what has brought Malaysia its wealth. On the downside, however, there are these gigantic white elephant projects. One Chinese opposition leader said to me that Mahathir was absolutely incapable of admitting mistakes. He's incredibly stubborn. The best example of this is the Bakun dam, which he's been trying to build since the early 1980s. It just doesn't make sense commercially or economically. They've moved tens of thousands of people, it's destroying an area of forest the size of Singapore, it's going to cost billions of dollars -- it just seems like an idiotic project. And it says a lot about Mahathir's rule.

Malaysia today is very different from the Malaysia of 20 years ago, right?

That's right. People enjoy a very good lifestyle here, particularly compared to a place like Thailand. You just have to look at Kuala Lumpur and its infrastructure (to know that). Mahathir has been a builder; there are buildings that you may not like, like the Petronas Towers, the tallest buildings in the world, and lots of highways, but Malaysians live relatively well.

What has kept Mahathir in power for so long?

Sheer willpower. One of his great qualities is his passion for his beliefs. But the flip side of that is his utter self-confidence; he never admits that he's wrong. Another negative is his utter political ruthlessness, because he always believes he is completely right. So that means he feels justified doing whatever is necessary to stay in power.

Does he enjoy any support from the people?

It's very difficult to tell exactly. There are no official polls in this country. The Police are the only people who take polls and they have told the Prime Minister that in some states in the Malay Peninsula support for his ruling party is down to one-third of the Malays. People are also still very angry with him over the Anwar (Ibrahim) affair. They just felt that it was extremely cruel that the ruthless element of his character came out too strongly. Mahathir didn't do that well at the last election. And my feeling is that if he doesn't watch out there will be significant losses for his party at the next election. That has to be held by early 2004, but it will probably be earlier than that.

Are there any signs of him relinquishing his power anytime soon?

He has hinted in the past of giving it all up. After the UNMO assembly about a month ago, he rescinded that. Nobody now believes that he has any intention of resigning, and in fact many people believe he may continue until 2007. He described himself in a recent press conference as "caught." "I can't resign, I'm caught," were his exact words, I think. Many people, myself included, believe he'll never resign.

What do you think will be his legacy?

I think that is what's worrying him now. He'd like it (his legacy) to be a prosperous Malaysia that has wonderful infrastructure and one in which Malays have taken their rightful place rather than being oppressed by the white man or being in a secondary position in their own country. That is the thing that has driven him all his life. But because of the Anwar affair, many people will judge him as a ruthless and cruel leader who humiliated and destroyed a man for no other reason than to stay in power. So they are his two legacies, and that is what's making him a somewhat tragic figure now.

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