

Profile: Malaysia's strongman Mahathir



Dr Mahathir Mohamad - shows no sign of stepping down

By Melina Nathan

Mahathir Mohamad is no stranger to controversy. Born on 20 December 1925 in Alor Setar, Kedah, the young Mahathir joined the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) at its foundation in 1946, and courted attention by writing provocative articles on the monarchy and the emancipation of women.

He qualified in medicine at the University of Malaya, then located in Singapore, and has always preferred Dr. to honorifics - such as Tan Sri Datuk - that precede many Malaysian names.

He set up private practice in his home town in 1957, a year after he married his wife, Hamsah, also a physician. They have two daughters and three sons.

Road to power

Dr Mahathir entered active politics in 1964 as a Member of Parliament for UMNO. He lost his seat in 1969 and was expelled from the party after attacking the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in an open letter, for neglecting the indigenous Malay community.



Dr Mahathir Mohamad - might not be the fittest, but survived hard times

In the political wilderness, he developed his ideas in a controversial book entitled "The Malay Dilemma". Its thesis was that the Malays have been marginalised during the colonial era; the book castigated them for apathetically accepting their second class lot.

It set the tone for future attacks on the West and others who he perceives as bent on subjugating Malaysia and threatening its success.

Dr Mahathir's nationalist credentials had been forged. His book struck such a chord with younger UMNO leaders that he was invited back into the party, re-elected to parliament in 1974, and appointed Minister of Education.

Within four years he was deputy leader of the party, and in 1981, became prime minister.

New tiger is born

On assuming high office, Dr Mahathir set about putting his ideas into practice and transforming Malaysia from an exporter of rubber and tin, into an Asian tiger producing electronic equipment, steel and cars.

In addition, he has taken on the mantle of spokesman for the New Asia, upholding Asian and Malaysian values, criticising Western double standards and winning a following among non-Western and developing countries.

Dr Mahathir has created a Malay middle class, and even billionaires, through government patronage as well as policies of positive discrimination in employment and higher education.

More visible projects to boost his people's sense of pride have included the world's tallest building and the "Multimedia Super Corridor" intended to rival California's Silicon Valley.

Opposition threats

He has been less kind to those who oppose him. Both Anwar Ibrahim's predecessors, like Mr Anwar himself, lasted just five years in the job of deputy prime minister.

In 1987, a challenge to Dr Mahathir's leadership led to mass detentions of his critics under the Internal Security Act and the sacking of judges he deemed too interfering. In 1993, he curbed the powers of the royalty.

Leadership questions

Dr. Mahathir's critics say that his grandiose schemes are at the root of Malaysia's massive debt, leading in turn to the currency crisis. They fear that his combative, anti-Western stance will worsen Malaysia's recession. They also question the links between politics and business that have created crony capitalists close to UMNO and its leaders.

These charges were at the heart of an implicit leadership challenge at the recent UMNO annual general assembly that consequently led to Anwar Ibrahim's sacking. The abortive challenge and its fallout mean that Dr Mahathir is unlikely to be opposed at next year's party polls.

This now leaves Malaysia in the hands of a 72-year-old, who underwent a quintuple heart bypass operation in 1989, has no successor, and is embarking on an economic regimen that flies in the face of free market principles.

Uncertain future

After 17 years in office and already South-east Asia's longest-serving leader, Dr Mahathir Mohamad shows no signs of stepping down.

The Asian financial crisis - which deposed President Suharto of Indonesia, led to changes of government elsewhere, and plunged Malaysia into its deepest recession - has only consolidated his grip on power.

Pre-empting any challenge to his leadership, he sacked his deputy and heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, and taken control of the Finance Ministry in order to do battle with speculators whom he blames for Malaysia's current economic woes.

Shunning IMF help as part of a neo-colonial plot that serves Western interests, he has implemented controversial currency controls that in effect isolate Malaysia from the global economy, which, in the past decade has fuelled its growth.

