

Lessons from Dr. Mahathir

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"As we tirelessly work towards turning around our economy in the light of the challenges we face, we have taken a leaf from your noble ideas that led Malaysia to overcome the Asian financial crisis. We are determined to follow your example, that if we have the will, we will succeed whatever the odds. Today, Malaysia is a stable and viable democracy with a strong economic base that is significantly assisting in the stabilization of the economies of Southeast Asia because of the contribution you made in your years of service to your great country.

"You have, indeed, left an indelible mark in the history of your country, your region and well beyond," President Mugabe said to the visiting former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He was speaking during a dinner hosted in honour of the former Malaysian leader and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Hj Mohd Ali at State House on Tuesday evening.

When the President showered Dr Mahathir with so much praise, some people questioned why, others wondered why while some thought the President was "just being diplomatically nice" to a visiting former head of state. But those who know "Dr M", as the former Malaysian prime minister is affectionately known in his country, know that he is a legend not only in his country but throughout the developing world.

Brief background

Dr Mahathir became the fourth prime minister of Malaysia on July 16, 1981. He retired in October 2003 after a hectic, historic and unforgettable 22 years at the helm. He was the prime architect of the Malaysian "alternative approach" to economic recovery after the currency crisis that hit most of the Asian economies in 1997. The currency crisis led to the devaluation of the Malaysia Ringgit, fuelled inflation and caused a lot of suffering to the Malaysians.

Despite the crisis, Dr Mahathir remained focused and his radical ideas earned him enemies in the West. But being a principled leader, he survived the "pressure cooker" that the imperialists put him into by subjecting him to persistent negative media publicity, underhand currency trading and outright lies. His ideas to turn around the Malaysian economy were a testimony that "textbook economics" is not always the best economics and that the IMF and World Bank do not have a monopoly of ideas when it comes to turning around a country's economy.

Speaking about Governance, Smart Partnership and Globalization during a meeting in Namibia on July 28 1998, Dr Mahathir said: "The best ideology, system or philosophy means nothing if the result does not bring about justice, fair play and prosperity for all."

Lessons from Malaysia

Let's clear issues first - Zimbabwe will never be Malaysia. The prescription that led to the economic revival of the Malaysian economy may or may not work in Zimbabwe. But one thing is certain: Zimbabwe can learn a lot from the way Malaysia survived during difficult times.

Zimbabwe is under siege just as Malaysia was in the late 1990s. Some Zimbabweans are already losing hope just as some Malaysians were during the Asian financial crisis. There is nothing unusual about losing hope, but as they say, "failure is not about falling down because we all fall down, but failure is the inability to stand up when one falls down". But how did Malaysia pull itself out of the woods? With so much pressure, how did the Malaysians survive? How did Dr Mahathir weather the storm? In the book entitled "Reflections on Asia" he explains: "First our massive recovery efforts must have a comprehensive perspective. We cannot afford to neglect political stability, social tranquility and cohesion while focusing on economics.

"Unfortunately, there is now too much advice from economic and financial experts who do not seem to be aware that there is a world out there that goes beyond money and finance, who therefore do not even take the broader economic picture into reckoning, still less the wider political and social ramifications. Second, assuming that we have a comprehensive perspective, we must ensure a clear and productive order of priorities. This is what strategic thinking is all about." As Zimbabweans, do we have a comprehensive perspective? Do we have a clear and productive order of priorities food for thought? Dr Mahathir goes on to explain that the third requirement for a turnaround strategy to work is a tight focus.

"Fourth, there is a need for balance, especially between the demands of social development and welfare, political stability and cohesion and economic and financial objectives. There is also a need to balance especially between the short-term imperatives and the longer-term imperatives.

"Fifth, I believe that we must not be blinkered. Nothing, no theory, no principle, no formula should be regarded so sacred that they cannot be critically examined, modified, changed or even discarded," said Dr Mahathir. He explained that the sixth requirement was "a total national effort" adding that: "More, the entire nation must be fully mobilized, working as one organic whole, united behind a single purpose."

Are Zimbabweans united behind a single purpose? Is the country's economic recovery programme a "Gono Project" or is it a national project? Are all politicians, ministers, economists, civil servants, farmers and even journalists united behind the efforts to turn around the country's economy?

Globalisation and the developing world

Besides being the architect of his country's economic turnaround programme, Dr Mahathir was (and still is today) an outspoken leader who never minced his words when it came to defending the poor against the rich. Speaking about globalization and its

impact on developing countries at the 10th World Economic Development Congress in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on June 27 2001, Dr Mahathir pointed out what he called the "five central challenges" that the developing world faced with regard to globalization.

He said the first challenge "is the simple challenge of independent thought, of thinking for us". He elaborated saying: "This is not very easy, especially since there are so many kind people who are very happy to do the thinking for us, and who get so upset when lesser beings like us try to do our own thinking.

"The second challenge is the challenge of truth. This is also not so simple because we live in a world in which there are not so many facts on globalization and where there is so much globalization nonsense. "The third challenge that confronts the developing world is the challenge of fairness and justice. How can we ensure a New World Order that is not only new but also much fairer and much more just?

"Why it is that everywhere, there is pressure to ensure 'one man, one vote?' except in the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank."Why is it that so much of the developed world, despite all their globalization and liberalization rhetoric, will not open up their agriculture market? Why do they subsidize their farmers handsomely when they declare the subsidies distort the market and the economy and all food subsidies and fuel subsidies in poor countries must be stopped or no promised loans will be disbursed?

"I believe that the fourth central challenge that faces the developing countries is the challenge of mutual benefit. How do we maximize the number of winners in the process of globalization and minimize the number of losers?"

The fifth challenge "is the challenge of creating a more compassionate and caring world, a world where the winner does not take all and the loser does not lose all, where much success must go to the strong and the competitive, without the weak and the uncompetitive having to descend to the depths of hell". Dr Mahathir said in fighting against globalization, the developing world should be guided by the principles of rationality, the principle of readiness, the principle of representation, the principle of responsibility and the principle of self-determination. Speaking about the use of market forces in determining prices of goods, Dr Mahathir said: "The market forces are merely disciplining governments so that they will adopt superior Western ways of governance and economic management."

Life has become unbearable in Zimbabwe. Prices of goods keep going up. Just last week, the Central Statistical Office announced that annual inflation had risen to 411 percent up from 359,8 percent in September. The country's economic turnaround programme seems to have gone off the rails, but great statesmen like Dr Mahathir know that "failure is not an option".

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