

"I'm being told you mustn't criticize the Prime Minister"

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Hannah Beech and Baradan Kuppusamy

Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is 81 years old, but he was as combative as ever when he met recently with TIME's Hannah Beech and Baradan Kuppusamy in his plush office in Malaysia's administrative capital, Putrajaya. They spoke of his feud with his handpicked successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, his legacy, and why the developing world needs a champion:

TIME: How will historians regard your 22 years as Prime Minister?

Mahathir: They would have noticed an acceleration in industrialization. The previous Prime Ministers had the same ideas. But they were unable to push it. When I became Prime Minister, I found ways and means to accelerate the process. So I suppose that period of very rapid [economic] growth from the 1980s to 2000 will be identified with me.

How do you compare that era with what's happening now?

[Abdullah] has discarded the policies and strategies we used during my time, claiming that they were not good for the country, particularly what were termed "megaprojects." We used the megaprojects to stimulate the economy. They put a stop to them, and when you put a stop to spending money, you don't generate wealth anymore ... I expect every Prime Minister to have his own imprint. [Abdullah] wants to be recognized as himself and not as a copy of somebody else. But when you try to do that, you may do better things or you may do worse things.

Downstairs you have a poster listing some of your accomplishments. Most are structures like Putrajaya and Petronas Towers. Do you feel your legacy as the builder of amazing things for Malaysia is being undermined?

Everything in the last 20 years has been my pet project, so if you touch anything, it's going to be touching my pet project. [But] all these things that I caused to be built are actually essential to this country. We need the infrastructure, we need Putrajaya. Imagine what Kuala Lumpur would be like if the government administration were still there. Planning means looking ahead. When I do things, I think very far ahead, not 10 years, 20 years, [but] 100 years ahead.

Looking back on your anointed successors, it seems they all disappointed you. Are you bad at choosing good leaders?

I'm not very good at it. I assume that people react to things as I would react. For example, if you are nice to people, they should be nice to you. If somebody is going against you, yet you are willing to forget and forgive and give them a place again in the government, they will be very grateful. But I find that the people I helped to reach certain heights actually turned against me.

Do you think Prime Minister Abdullah is ungrateful to you?

At least he should have noticed that I went out of my way to give him an opportunity.

Is he more afraid of dissent than you were?

He has made UMNO his personal party. They cannot say anything that he doesn't approve of. I'm being told, look, you mustn't criticize the Prime Minister because he is an institution, he is an UMNO president and therefore an institution. Yes, the UMNO president is an institution, but the incumbent is not. When I was there, he challenged me. Now he's not

allowing anybody to say a word against him ... What I don't like is creating what would be called a police state. Nobody is allowed to organize any meeting and invite me to speak. If you do, the police call you up.

As Malaysia's Prime Minister, you saw yourself as the unofficial spokesman for the developing world. Is anyone taking up that role now?

Third World countries have got nobody to stand up for them. They either owe money to banks or they are receiving aid. We are much more free [in Malaysia]: we don't owe money, we don't ask for aid, and therefore we are in the position to speak up. If Malaysia gives up that role, it will be a very sad day because the strong countries will then steamroll over us. Thaksin [Shinawatra] said he wanted to be like me, but he did not [speak out], and Suharto is not around. So we have to wait for somebody ... Today, the tendency is to be associated with the big people. The [developing world wants] to be nice to President Bush, to praise Prime Minister Blair.

How do you view the Bush administration's efforts to build democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Democracy must be internally generated. You cannot force it from the top?it's not going to work.

If historians were to look back at your tenure 50 years from now, how do you think they will define your legacy?

They would have noticed an acceleration in the process of industrialization. Industrialization, of course, did not start with me. The previous prime ministers had the same ideas. But they were unable to push it. When I became prime minister, I found ways and means to accelerate the process. So, I suppose, that period would be identified with me, that period of very rapid growth from the 1980s to the 2000.

The new P.M. has only been in office for a couple years, so it's difficult to talk about his legacy. But when you compare what happened during your tenure and what is happening now, how would you compare the two?

In many ways, he has frankly discarded the policies and strategies we used during my time, claiming that they were not good for the country, particularly what were termed as mega-projects. We used the mega-projects to stimulate the economy. They put a stop to them, and when you put a stop to spending money, you don't generate wealth anymore.

Why do you think the Prime Minister's policies are so different?

Maybe it's because he wants to be different. He doesn't want to be a fair copy of myself. But maybe he's wrongly advised.

When you picked him as your successor, did you expect him to be a carbon copy of yourself?

No, I didn't expect. I expect every Prime Minister to have his own imprint. He wants to be different, he wants to be recognized as being himself and not a copy of somebody else. But when you try to do that, you may do better things or you may do worse things.

And do you think he is doing better or worse things?

I expected a little bit of a slowdown but not a reversal. Maybe the direction would be slightly altered, but having been an agricultural country and converting the agricultural country into an industrialized country, to find that the new government wishes to revert to being an agricultural country is very unsettling. Because we rejected agriculture simply because it was not generating enough wealth, it was not generating enough jobs for our people. And today, of course, we go back to agriculture, despite modern agriculture, despite

biotechnology, it's not going to continue growth the way industry contributed.

Looking back on your various anointed successors, it seems as though they all, in some ways or another, disappointed you. Do you think that you might be a bad judge of who makes a good leader?

I think I'm not very good at that. I assume that people would react to things the way I would react. For example, if you are nice to people, they should be nice to you. If somebody is going against you yet you are willing to forget and forgive and give them a place again in the government, they will be very grateful. But I find that the people I helped to reach certain heights are not really grateful. They are actually turned against me.

So you don't think that the P.M. is grateful for what you did?

At least he should have noticed that I actually went out of my way to give him an opportunity.

When you retired in 2003, you said you would not interfere in politics. What made you change your mind?

The decision not to build the bridge to [Singapore]. You see, when we are building the bridge on our side, within our area, no other country has any right to interfere. He is saying we cannot build even on our own side because Singapore might object. Then you are actually saying that you are doing something in our own country will require the consent or approval of Singapore. That means you are surrendering your independence, your sovereignty. That was what annoyed me very much. And about this bridge, it is absolutely essential simply because there is overcrowding down in Johore Bahru and people cannot get around because where the causeway meets the land, there is a huge crowd there, people coming and going to Singapore.

Downstairs in your office, you have a poster listing some of your accomplishments, and most of them are buildings or structures: the Grand Prix track, Petronas Towers, the Multimedia Super Corridor, the North-South super highway, Putrajaya. Is there any element with the suspension of the bridge project of personal hurt, where your legacy of the builder of amazing things for Malaysia is somehow being tampered with?

They keep on mentioning these pet projects of mine. Everything in the last 20 years have been my pet projects, so if you touch anything, it's going to be touching my pet project. It is not because it was pet project. All these things that I caused to be built are actually essential to this country. We need the infrastructure, we need Putrajaya. I mean, imagine what Kuala Lumpur would be like now ... if the government administration were still in Kuala Lumpur. I must admit that when I do things, I think very far ahead, not 10 years, 20 years, [but] 100 years ahead. When we built the airport, Subang was handling 14 million passengers; today the airport is handling more than 20 million passengers, and we built it for 125 million passengers 100 years hence. Because to build an airport, to get land for an airport is very difficult. As the town grows, people object to having an airport close to their back door. On the other hand, they would need the airport. So you have to think ahead. You build Putrajaya, it's not for today. It's for the future. You have to think ahead. If you're planning, planning means looking ahead. How far did you look ahead?

Is the P.M. more afraid of dissent than you were?

He has made UMNO his personal party. They cannot say anything that he doesn't approve of. I'm being told, look, you mustn't criticize the Prime Minister because he is an institution, he is an UMNO president and therefore an institution. Yes, the UMNO president is an institution, but the incumbent is not. When I was there, he challenged me. Now he's not allowing anybody to say a word against him ... What I don't like is creating what would be called a police state. Nobody is allowed to organize any meeting and invite me to speak. If

you do, the police call you up.

One of the things that you did consistently during your tenure was to speak out as an unofficial spokesperson for the developing world. Do you anyone else now taking up that role?

This is something I'm very sad about because the Third World has got nobody to stand up for them, to speak for them, simply because they are under obligation, they either owe money to banks or they are receiving aid. We are much more free. We don't owe money, we don't ask for aid, and therefore we are in the position to speak up for them. But if Malaysia gives up that role, I think it would be a very sad day for everyone because now the strong countries will just steam-roll over or just push through everything they want to do, and that is very bad. At the moment, I don't see anyone, I thought that Thaksin [Shinawatra] might. He said he wants to be like me, but he did not, and Suharto is not around. So we have to wait some time for somebody willing to speak up on it. It must be a country that is not dependent upon aid nor dependent upon loans from other countries.

How do you think stronger countries steam-roll over other countries?

Let's take the WTO, they talk all the time about a borderless world, about free access of capital, and their entrepreneurs into all countries. This capital and these big corporations going into small countries are very likely to exploit these countries as happened with the banana republics. So somebody will have to argue it out in the WTO and prevent this from happening ... Today it seems that the tendency is to be associated with the big people. They want to be nice to President Bush, to praise Prime Minister Blair, to be friendly with [John] Howard. These are the people who caused all the trouble so far ... Even if we are very well developed, even if we become a developed country, we should always stand up for the poor people, for the underdog.

What is your view on the efforts of democracy-building in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Democracy must be internally generated. People need to be educated as to the limitations of democracy. If you don't understand democracy, it is not going to work. It is one of the most complex systems. When you bring in everybody to make decisions, literally make decision by using the votes, well, we know, even the right to vote may be abused. You have to understand the limitations of democracy ... You cannot force it from the top. It's not going to work.

How are your memoirs coming along?

Not getting along very well. Because I have to write speeches ... give talks, I'm busy. And being interviewed by the press. A terrible burden.

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