

**Mahathir vs Lee**  
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**By Mong Palatino**

When Singapore's longest-serving prime minister and current Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew [was interviewed](#) by *The New York Times* last month, nobody expected anything controversial—or that he would upset neighbor Malaysia.

And mostly there was nothing there that would have done, with the 87-year-old leader talking mainly about yoga and literature. But Lee also took the opportunity to take a few jabs at Malaysia, and while the old statesman might be forgiven by some for being a bold thinker, his critics in Malaysia have decided to challenge his 'revisionist' version of history. And things really got interesting when Mahathir Mohamad, an old rival of Lee's and Malaysia's Prime Minister for 22 years, wrote a [scathing reply](#) in [his blog](#).

So what did Lee say to the *NYT* that so angered Mahathir? First, he said that he lamented being 'turfed out' of the Malaysian Federation in 1965, which he claimed was the reason why racial politics is polarizing Malaysia today. Lee further alleged that had Malaysia adopted the multiracial policies of Singapore, there would have been 'improved inter-racial relations and an improved holistic situation' in Malaysia. 'Now we have a very polarized Malaysia...that's bad for us as close neighbours,' he said.

Lee also asserted that his decision to reject racial politics and establish an integrated society in Singapore was borne out of the suffering they endured when Singapore became part of Malaysia for two years. In addition, he said that it was wrong to favour the Malays in Malaysia, saying: 'Malaysians saw it as a Malay country, all others are lodgers. So the Sultans, the Chief Justice and judges, generals, police commissioner, the whole hierarchy is Malay. All the big contracts for Malays. Malay is the language of the schools although it does not get them into modern knowledge. So the Chinese build and find their own independent schools to teach Chinese, the Tamils create their own Tamil schools, which do not get them jobs. It's a most unhappy situation.'

Mahathir dismissed the statements as mere fantasies, and used his blog to try to 'correct' Lee's statements. He reminded Lee that while 'amnesia is permissible,' that to claim that Singapore's dissociation from Malaysia is the cause of racist politics in Malaysia 'is simply not supported by facts of history.'

Mahathir, in fact, blamed the rise of racism in Malaysia on the brief period that Singapore was part of the Malaysian Federation. He said there was less racial politics in the country prior to the inclusion of Singapore as member of the federation. He even accused Lee of instigating racial conflict through appealing to Chinese sympathies in order to dominate peninsular politics. Mahathir said that the slogan 'Malaysian Malaysia,' which was coined by Lee's party, 'implied that the Chinese were not having equal rights with the Malays.'

Mahathir went on to say that he doesn't believe Lee's boast that Singapore is a multi-racial society. He noted, for example, that Singapore's population is made up of 75 percent Chinese but that 'they own 95 per cent of the economy.'

Finally, Mahathir dismissed Singapore's political system, claiming that those who try to compete against the ruling party are sued for libel and that the opposition isn't allowed to sit in parliament.

So who's telling the truth? Both are, in fact, correct on many points. Lee was right on the mark when he discussed the impact of racial politics in Malaysia, while Mahathir made some valid points when dissecting the flaws of Singapore's political system. Either way, both have held power and influence for decades, and so in many ways should be seen as accountable for weaknesses in their respective states.

More broadly, though, the online tussle between Mahathir and Lee underscores the continuing debate surrounding the modern history of both countries—and their continued rivalry. And it makes one wonder whether it will be possible for these countries to come to any impartial conclusions while these two leaders are still around and influential.

This wasn't the first (and certainly won't be the last) time that ideologues from Singapore and Malaysia have fought over both real and manufactured sins committed by the other. But such debates shouldn't distract scholars and today's leaders from their more essential task—the building or rebuilding of non-racist societies.

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