



BY SA'ODAH ELIAS

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself had been known to admit that the initial reaction from people to many of his ideas was one of incredulity.

From the Look East and Buy British Last policies to setting up our very own car company and turning Labuan, an island off Sabah - that even many Malaysians were not aware existed - into an international offshore financial centre, his ideas always tested the limit of peoples' imagination.

Dr Mahathir's ideas became progressively more ambitious, or far-fetched, depending on who one spoke to, when he entered his second decade in office and no amount of ridicule could dampened his fervour.

But he can now literally thumb his nose at his many foreign as well as local critics as most of his ambitious plans have come to fruition, such as the birth of KLCC, the KL International Airport, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya and the Sepang Formula One circuit.

Of course, not every one of them turned out to be what he envisaged, like the ambitious but problematic Bakun Dam project and Perwaja Steel that was supposed to be the core of the country's heavy industry bid, but generally speaking, most were successful. And all the successes did not come naturally or by chance.

Dr Mahathir was not one who only espoused ideas, but a leader who kept tabs on the progress of everything that he initiated.

He was also not above using every trick that he knew to ensure the successful implementation of his ideas, from persuasion to cajoling and sometimes even overt nagging to motivate the people.

In between running the country, he would take time off to visit the sites of his "babies," sometimes on his own, according to his aides.

Not one to take peoples' words for everything, he had been known to insist on personally checking every bolt and screw to guarantee everything worked to his satisfaction.

One does not have to be an admirer to admit that Malaysia is where it is now in terms of development and progress because of his visions.

Even the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, that ended the country's continuous average annual growth of 8% since 1988, didn't bring our economy to its knees - thanks to his timely intervention to reverse several conservative measures taken by the then Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Turning adversity into strength, he introduced economic reforms and reorientation and instituted selective capital controls.

From the time of Independence, the three Prime Ministers before him had all focused on bettering the lot of the people, but it was Dr Mahathir who steered the country towards industrialisation by actively courting foreign direct investment in the manufacturing sector and providing various incentives and tax-free status for goods manufactured for export.

As a long-term plan, he introduced the Vision 2020 to propel the country into achieving a fully industrialised status by the year 2020.

He regularly quipped that even when he was gone, he would hover over those entrusted with the responsibilities of seeing the vision through, just to make sure that everything was on track.

Today, Malaysians have truly come

# Making his critics eat their words

S 31/10/2003 - 11 PRECISE



TOWERING PROOF: The Petronas Twin Towers which have come to symbolise Malaysia's success.

into their own. Skills acquired after years of working for and together with foreign investors, have seen many locals venturing into manufacturing, trade and property development.

From an agriculture-based country, Malaysia is today the 17th biggest trading nation in the world, with trade worth nearly RM760bil and a per capita income of US\$4,000 (RM15,200).

It is a far cry from the days of exporting raw materials like tin and rubber that brought in a mere RM5.2bil in the 70s, when one in every two households lived in poverty.

At the onset of his era, Dr Mahathir's main ambition was to see Malaysia become a truly independent nation that can hold its own and not be pushed around and bullied by richer countries.

But while honour and integrity was very important to him, Dr Mahathir was always willing to learn from others.

This was clearly seen by his willingness to not only learn, but also adopt policies from other countries, especially Japan and Korea.

The Look East policy was not just about learning from the economic miracles of the two countries that were almost devastated by wars, but more importantly it was about emulating the work ethics and culture of their people.

Another was the Malaysia Incorporated and privatisation concept modelled after the "Japan Incorporated," a term that was initially coined as a derisive way of looking at the Japanese government's close co-operation with the private sector.

Twenty years on, this private sector-government partnership has served the country well, heightening the interdependence between the public and private sectors, so that if any party failed to co-operate, both would suffer.

Similar to the Look East policy, the crux of Malaysia Incorporated also involved a paradigm shift in mental attitude of public servants to regard the success of business, commercial and industrial enterprises as part of the nation's and their own success.

For Dr Mahathir, this quest to change the mentality of the people, especially the civil servants will never end. From the time he introduced the Leadership by Example and *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah* (clean, efficient and trustworthy) campaigns 20 years ago, until his last days in office, his tune has never wavered - Malaysians must be more disciplined, systematic, polite, courageous, diligent and must possess the qualities upheld by all religions.

His many ambitious plans and mega projects are already known, but many did not realise that nothing seemed too trivial for his attention.

Even erratic rubbish collection and the manner people hang their laundry in high-rise apartments and flats gained his hawk-eyed attention.

During his time, many unwieldy bureaucratic procedures were eliminated.

Dr Mahathir also seemed to have a very healthy respect for the ability of Malaysians to adapt and learn new things.

If the proverbial critics were to be believed, Proton that was incorporated in 1985 to build the national cars would have closed shop a long time ago. Instead, another company, Perodua was set up to produce more local-made cars followed closely by a motorcycle manufacturing plant.

Today, Proton and Perodua cars choke up Malaysian roads, whizzing past Japanese, Continental and other foreign made cars. Proton Saga, Wira, Satria, Perdana, Kancil, Kembara and Arena have even landed on many foreign shores.

The national car project was another manifestation of Malaysians as people with integrity, who are willing to take up new challenges and are not afraid to try new things.

It is not for nothing that Dr Mahathir travels abroad.

Those who have travelled with him, tell of the punishing schedules that he keeps in order to be the salesman for Malaysia.

Also, everything good he saw in foreign lands, germinated into new ideas to make Malaysia a richer and better country to live in.

Having attained better-than-expected success in the industrialisation process, in 1991, Dr Mahathir announced the plan to turn Labuan into IOF.

This idea, he said, was not pulled out of a magician's hat, but came about after an extensive study of the island's strength and weaknesses.

He took pains to stress that the efforts must never be construed by off-shore companies as a proclamation of a "free-for-all" policy.

Instead it was for selective suitors of high integrity and international standing who were prepared to set up operating offices on the island.

Although its success is quite limited due to its stringent regulations, Labuan is slowly turning into a bustling functional financial centre.

Dr Mahathir also left an undeniable mark in the field of education and religion, stressing the need to attain a harmonious balance in intellectual and spiritual development.

Another of his successes is the Islamisation policy introduced at the start of his tenure as Prime Minister.

This was soon followed by the introduction of the Islamic banking system in 1983 that has since been expanded into various other services which are based on the Islamic principles.

A measure of success of this, is in the sheer number of Islamic banking products offered by commercial banks today and the number of non-Muslims who choose them.

For Dr Mahathir, the setting up of Islamic banking was not a mere gesture to symbolise the country's status as an Islamic nation.

More importantly, it proved that Islamic principles were compatible with modern economic management.

This success, like most of Dr Mahathir's vision, were sneered at, but in the end the critics had to swallow their words.