



Mahathir's 'Project Malaysia'

by **REHMAN RASHID** SUN 31/10/2003 - 2 **PRECISE**

That will be the next chapter of what has become for all the world a case study in national development. It's never been done this way, at this pace, to such ends as stated in our own "road map" to the future, Vision 2020.

The story promises new plot twists, for Mahathir's containment of political opposition, both within his party and without, has critically retarded the nation's political maturation. Dissent has been radicalised by Mahathirism's relentless momentum, diminishing the Opposition's effectiveness in the centre and intensifying its influence on the fringe.

Thus, the peripheries remain restive. Fanatical splinters may yet break off in the shadowlands of religious politics. In education, communal systems may resist merger. As income gaps widen, organised crime may grow fat on urban cynicism and corruption.

Abdullah's administration will have to field these and many other challenges. This nation remains very much a work-in-progress. The perils and pitfalls of complacency and incompetence remain.

But Mahathir has established as a fait accompli - hard, fast, firm on the ground and here to stay - this Brave New Malaysia for us to use, or lose.

Malaysia today showcases an original and literally ground-breaking model of development. Mahathir's espousal of "leadership by example" now resounds in the emerging world. Malaysia's innovations in Islamic banking, for example, or resource management, or private-sector cooperation, could be emulated by other developing countries.

But Malaysia's more profound example is in demonstrating that all have the right, and perhaps the duty, to determine the sort of countries they would wish to develop for themselves.

In 1986, five years after he became prime minister, Mahathir told this

reporter that a leader had to be "someone who can make his people more than they are". History may grant that Mahathir Mohamad, cursed by his enemies as a dictator, drew his authority from the empowerment of his people and wielded it to impose upon them not a domineering individual, but a defining idea.

Call it, in the end, the idea that Malaysia Boleh.

Still, now as 21 years ago when Mahathir first noted the developmental value of angst, everyone in this country remains a little unhappy. Earlier this month on a BBC World television programme, in what would be one of Mahathir's last interviews with the international media as PM, a woman called in to protest that "as a Malaysian Chinese, I have felt like a second-class citizen all my life".

Mahathir reminded her that the Malays had felt like that for centuries. "In this country," he said, "everyone is a second-class citizen."

His life's achievement may be that he has left us with the makings of a first-class nation nonetheless.

(Rehman Rashid became a journalist a month before Mahathir Mohamad became prime minister.)

Mahathir drew his authority from the people and used it to impose upon them not an individual but an idea.



In one of his first interviews with the international media as prime minister, after less than a year in office, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told *Time* magazine that in Malaysia, no one could be too happy. In a nation as diverse as this, he observed, people could get quite unhappy if they thought other people were too happy.

Governing such a nation was an exercise in anger management. Social stability was based on equitable frustrations. In Malaysia, national unity could only be unity of purpose. No two Malaysians might work for the same reason, but all might be made to work for a common goal.

Now we can see how much of Mahathir's effectiveness was due to his having stayed unshakably "on message" throughout his career. He rose to top office on iron-clad statements of intent, formed of clear perceptions. Once there, he harnessed divergence and played conflicting forces off each other, tacking upcurrent against the wind in steering this country where he believed it should go.

His tactics were to keep the nation always slightly off-kilter; just enough for forward momentum, while using the weight of his personal leadership to keep the applectart from overturning. The Master of Disaster, there was no crisis or conflict that Mahathir could not turn to the advantage of his agenda.

"Mahathirism" (for genuine lack of a better word to describe it) was a form of strategic destabilisation. While keeping an iron grip on the political centre with one hand, he slapped the rakyat awake and whipped them onward with the other.

He was empowered to do this by Tun Abdul Razak's New Economic Policy, drafted in 1970 while Mahathir himself was in the political wilderness, writing his own manifesto in *The Malay Dilemma*. Both documents addressed the collapsing race relations of the 1960s, and both prescribed economic solutions to Malaysia's political problems.

History will have to read them together, for this was the therapy Mahathir administered for 22 years, through five general elections, four deputies, two economic recessions and one political crisis after another, while his fellow Malaysians doubled in numbers and tripled their per capita income in the process.

Economic mobility may have benefited from party-political stasis. But the cabinet is now top-heavy with four-decade careers and familiarly ageing faces, while the nation is physically unrecognisable from the one they took over, longer ago than anyone under 25 can remember.

Now this phase of Project Malaysia is done. Under the Build-Operate-Transfer plan envisioned by Mahathir, he now hands over the country he built to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to operate, and eventually transfer to his own successor.