

Dr M should resist the Young Turk temptation

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For the sake of keeping his dignity intact, and sparing Malaysians any embarrassment, Tun Dr Mahathir should rein in any notion he might have about his indispensability to the Malaysian body politic, writes TUNKU ABDUL AZIZ.

"I HAVE watched Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's brand of governance with a mixture of alarm, disbelief, despair, pride and joy, my senses and emotions continually thrown into a state of confusion and turmoil.

"His gamble with his personal integrity in outrageously questionable ventures — putting at risk the Employees Provident Fund and the national reserves, no less, in his forays into the international tin market and the world of currency speculation — so glibly described as being undertaken in the 'national interest' — must rank as the most bizarre aspect of his premiership.

"It would be churlish to deny him the accolade he so richly deserves (his many inconsistencies and contradictions notwithstanding) for his brilliant stewardship of this difficult, dynamic, multi-ethnic, and potentially volatile nation in search of greatness.

"Even Dr Mahathir's worst detractors will readily admit that no one has done as much as he to instil a sense of national pride and confidence in his countrymen and countrywomen based on solid social, economic and political achievements.

"There can be no denying that this man of destiny has wrought changes that will ensure that Malaysia will never be the same again. I will miss him."

I stand by every word I wrote above in a special tribute to Dr Mahathir on the invitation of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in October 2003, and my admiration has not altered one iota. If anything, he has gained my sympathy, and the proud man that he is, he probably thinks I am being condescending. He is mistaken on that score.

It cannot be easy for him who as prime minister was larger than life and exercised power as completely as any absolute ruler to find himself out on a limb suddenly.

He has to learn, as the Tunku and Tun Hussein Önn had to before him to eat humble pie once out of office. No disgrace in that. It might be difficult to swallow at first, but for the sake



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of keeping his dignity intact and sparing us unnecessary embarrassment, he should disabuse himself quickly of any notion he might continue to harbour about his indispensability to the Malaysian body politic. He must move on with good grace as befits an elder statesman, in tandem with the new national values and aspirations. He should resist the temptation of behaving like an angry Young Turk, and, in the process, becoming a disruptive influence. Therein lies true greatness.

As a respected builder of our nation, Dr Mahathir should rejoice in having chosen as his successor a person with impeccable ethical and religious credentials, with a good pedigree to boot. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may not be all things to all men. He has a mind of his own and he may not want to accept Tun's now discredited dictum that "Father knows best, and don't ask too many questions" which few dared to challenge in the good old days of Mahathirism. Today's Malaysia is a relatively open society, open to different points of view and ideas, even dissenting ones.

There are fewer sacred cows now. If we value the relaxation of the rules that emasculated us intellectually, and, some would say, spiritually, during the Dr Mahathir era, we should bear in mind that the space we enjoy today carries a price tag. We have to act responsibly to protect our country's larger freedom — the freedom to live in peace and prosperity in a so-

ciety that Tom Harrison, the famous curator of the Sarawak Museum once referred to as a "tangle of peoples".

This brings me to a consideration of the need for us all to focus our creative energies on issues that unite and strengthen us rather than harp on those that can only be resolved with an impossibly large reservoir of goodwill and understanding. This unfortunately is currently not available. We need to address our grievances with an open agenda, based on what is good for our country.

I recall all those years ago as a schoolboy in Special Malay 2 at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star, how thrilled and proud we were when it was announced at the school assembly that Mahathir Mohamad had been accepted for medical studies in Singapore. He was already a role model to us; his good manners were a marked contrast to the other Senior Cambridge boys. And he has continued to fascinate and confound me.

I look back to my salad days with nostalgia tinged with pride because of the achievements of our seniors in universities in Singapore, England and elsewhere. Admittedly nothing new for Kedah that had always sent its best scholars overseas and who had returned to occupy positions that in other States were the preserve of the British but it meant more Kedah boys were being prepared for higher responsibility in the struggle for Merdeka.

I have been a critic of many of his actions when he was prime minister, but I have also been among the first to congratulate him on the soundness of some of his policies. In the years that I headed Transparency International Malaysia, I had to chastise him on numerous occasions about the state of corruption in the country. Many people both in Malaysia and abroad thought how brave I was to speak out so bluntly on corruption and ethical issues in Dr Mahathir's Malaysia.

It is not that I was brave. Rather, it was Dr Mahathir who was perceptive to know that I had no personal political agenda and that my criticism of his administration had everything to do with my love for our country and my desire to ensure for Malaysia a place at the top table of the community of clean nations. He was always surrounded by sycophantic supplicants, and the fact that I had never asked him for anything helped my anti-corruption cause. My criticism of him now is that he did not use his considerable power to fight corruption when he could.

Dr Mahathir is not a spent force. His charisma and the respect that we have for him will ensure that he will always have a positive role to play in building a new Malaysia, not necessarily in his own image because times have changed. The Malaysia that he can help to build will be an amalgam of material progress a la Vision 2020, equality of opportunity for all, zero tolerance for corruption and unethical public behaviour, and national integration based on shared values and opportunities.

What better time than the 49th anniversary of Merdeka in which to rededicate ourselves to these ideals of justice, fairness, peace and prosperity for all.

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