

(This commentary appears in *The Edge* issue of Aug 14-20)

THE Franco-Czech author Milan Kundera is, to me, a brooding intellectual who uses his literary skills to tackle some of the more serious issues in unique ways. I accidentally came across his first book that I read, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and I recently sought out and finished reading *Immortality*, a more recent book.

In *Immortality*, Kundera adopted a story-telling approach that weaved many characters and stories that, in my opinion, do not quite converge in the end. I enjoyed the little stories and the main thread, but I am still struggling to find a coherent interpretation of his view on immortality.

Then, almost expectedly, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad exploded with all the majesty of a

Mahathirian blow-up. That outburst has escalated into a serious effort by Mahathir to undermine Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Prime Minister. Obviously, Mahathir still sees himself as that powerful person he was for over two decades.

Since I was also struggling with Kundera's book, I saw the flare-up in the context of immortality – Mahathir protecting his immortality. Another part of me contested the immortality thesis and proposed an explanation based on power instead.

Power and immortality are opposite concepts in this context. Power is about the exercise of the full limits of authority to achieve some end, any end. Immortality is what history decides to record,

# Dismantling a false facade

The Sun - 14/8/2006

after the fact. In many ways, one is quite powerless when it comes to how history will remember us because history will remember us the way history wants to remember us. If we are not part of history, as most of us will be, we would be mere mortals.

All of us were once someone we no longer are. Either we have changed or the circumstances around us have changed such that

our location in the new environment has changed as well. One of the more difficult adjustments towards change occurs when

we have to give up a position we are used to, possibly one that comes with prestige, position and power, the three Ps, so to speak. Public office is one such position that comes with the fleeting three Ps.

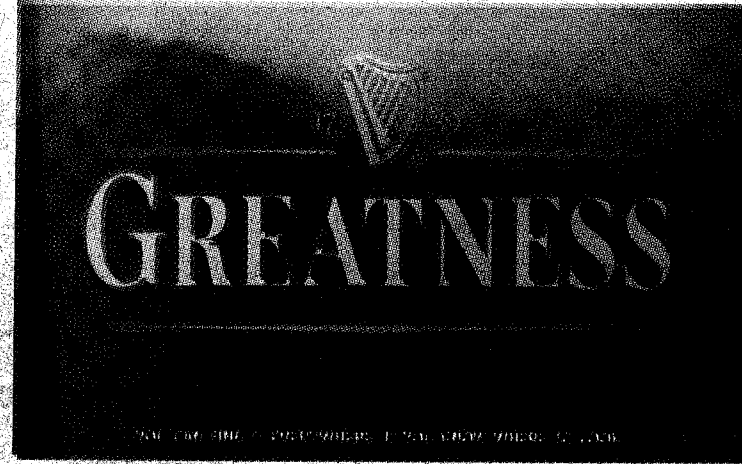
The office of Prime Minister in a country such as Malaysia is a powerful, almost omnipotent, one. Despite what the constitution says, the executive office can intrude into almost any area it wants to. This is because the people of this country and the institutions that represent us acquiesce to the executive branch of government.

During his tenure, Mahathir redefined institutional boundaries significantly. While that gave him broad powers required to make things happen quickly, it also diminished institutional structure

and integrity. Thus his legacy – his claim to immortality – will not just be about what he made happen, the good and the bad, but also about institutional integrity, about the notion of governance and the rule of law. On the latter, he will be severely graded.

His recent outburst is quite telling. Quite clearly, he drew a very thin line between money in the Treasury and money in Petronas or any other statutory bodies when it comes to managing public finances. He implied that although the Treasury may face revenue constraints, Petronas' coffers offer the government another source of finance. He basically admitted that it was Petronas that had financed the construction of Putrajaya and lamented that the present administration had held back further development there.

Mahathir's tirade against the present government seemed to have stemmed from the assumption that he has defined a vision for Malaysia. He has, in fact, developed



a road map towards that vision. Indeed, he has implemented part of it. His successors need only to implement what he has already decided. He has decided what is best for us and how best to go about doing things. Thus, it upsets him that some of his decisions were reversed or that some of his plans were not implemented.

Proton was an idea that could have succeeded in some form today if it was well executed. When it could only sell cars in the highly protected domestic market and failed to penetrate any export markets, it has failed. To continue protecting Proton – through prohibitive import duties or control of approved permits – is untenable.

After 20 years, Proton will have to survive in the face of real challenges.

There are two key problems with Mahathir's stance.

Firstly, he is not correct in all his decisions. Secondly, armed with his own mandate, his successor has every right to define his own agenda.

Perhaps, most telling of all, is that his criticisms – and one assumes these are issues he deems most

important – are mainly about his policies. Mahathir, the elderly statesman, could have chosen issues that have greater public interest to champion but he chose to defend his legacy instead. Of course, the language used is one layered with claims of nationalism, patriotism and all things altruistic.

Abdullah tolerates Mahathir but it is unlikely that Mahathir would have tolerated a Mahathir. That means Abdullah has brought the country significantly forward, not in terms of monuments and buildings but in terms of space. The personalised omnipresence of Mahathir the Prime Minister is

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## Guestcolumn

by Nungsari A Radhi

# Mahathir has had his time

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being dismantled. No man and no office should occupy too much space. We must all occupy some small space as the country belongs to us all, and we should all be responsible for it.

Public life, from the civil servant right up to the prime minister, is about service to the nation. If one does one's job well, one is simply fulfilling the public trust. One thanks the public for the opportunity given to serve. Doing a good job as a public servant, even as prime minister, does not invite any gratitude from the public. Mahathir is wrong to expect gratitude from Abdullah as he is wrong to expect anyone to be indebted to him in any way for doing his job.

We cannot occupy two spaces simultaneously and be at peace in either one. Mahathir has had his time and the time he had was at the behest of his party and his constituency. He had an agenda and the political process gave him the chance to manifest it. He may not accomplish all that he wanted to but whatever he did were there to be seen.

In the meantime, the country needs statesmen who are above partisan politics. Justifying and defending decisions are political in nature whose exercise is rarely dignified and it is for this reason that statesmen should be detached from this debate. To remain combative and publicly engaged in policy debate is to invite criticism at a level unbecoming of a statesman. He will just be another target.

The young who are at the forefront of change need inspiration. Mahathir can contribute by the advocacy of Mahathirian qualities now that he has the luxury of not having to manage the manifestations of those qualities in others. Inspire the young to have

dreams, to be independent, to believe in themselves, to hold on to their ideals, to be forthright, and to serve the country.

Abdullah, on the other hand, went on record to say he rejects the Machiavellian dictum of the end justifying the means. This is quite remarkable for a career politician who has suffered quite a few knocks along the way but I believe the man. He should remain true to his convictions and carry them out. If anything, his public appeal will only increase if he does more of the things he promised, the things that got him the biggest mandate in Malaysia's electoral history.

Abdullah must continue with his agenda. He should do more on corruption. He has opened up space for discourse – something unfamiliar to many Malaysians who have lived under the tight reins of Mahathir – and he must continue on that path despite the occasional problems arising from abuses. He must refrain from closing that space.

Indeed, the country will prosper in the long run if we can handle freedom wisely. We must develop the maturity to deal with freedom to prevent some of us from defining the level of freedom we deserve. It is freedom – more than any fiscal initiative – that will fuel the economy. The creative, entrepreneurial energy released by freedom will underpin the nation's economic future.

Despite shortcomings, what Abdullah is doing is dismantling the false façade we have become familiar with, and he is giving space and responsibility back to the people. I look forward to a different sense of values and the reinvigoration of institutions. He has my support.

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