



NOTHING PERSONAL

TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD ON LEGACY

Interview by EDDIN KHOO and JASON TAN
Pictures by VINOD NAIR

TUN DR MAHATHIR bin Mohamad, the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, turns 82 on July 10. He led the country for 22 of Malaysia's 50 years as an independent nation, making him one of the longest-serving elected premiers of modern times.

Mahathir succeeded Tun Hussein Onn as Prime Minister of Malaysia upon the latter's retirement in 1981, after becoming the fifth Umno president, a position he won uncontested. He is currently advisor to Petronas and Proton, and honorary president of the Perdana Leadership Foundation, among other positions.

A native of Alor Setar, Kedah, he was educated at the Malay School, Seberang Perak, Alor Setar before attending Sultan Abdul Hamid College in the same town. He would famously go on to read medicine at the University of Malaya, Singapore.

Mahathir was active in politics from 1945 (though some say his politicisation occurred much younger), when he joined various organisations such as the Kesatuan Pemuda Melayu Kedah, and later, Umno.

Mahathir reached the hustings in 1964, when he contested and won the Kota Star Selatan parliamentary constituency, winning with a 4,210 majority against the candidate of the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (the precursor to PAS), Mohd Shaari Abdul Shukor.

In what must have aided a steep learning curve, he would hold the seat for just one term, losing in the next general elections in 1969 to PMIP strongman Haji Yusof Rawa by 989 votes. (He trounced Haji Yusof by 15,761 votes when they next met in the 1982 elections, for the Kubang Pasu constituency.)

Mahathir, by then elected member of the Umno Supreme Council, was expelled from the party in September 1969 following his criticism, made public, of first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's alleged neglect of Malay economic interests that Mahathir claimed was a cause of the May 13 riots.

He wrote *The Malay Dilemma* in the wilderness years, and was readmitted into Umno in March of 1972 by Tun Abdul Razak, the Tunku's former deputy and then Prime Minister. Much of the thinking behind

The Malay Dilemma was taken on board in the formulation of the New Economic Policy, the affirmative action plan prescribed by the government as a root-and-branch reorganisation of Malaysian society in the hopes of achieving a unified nation.

The high-watermark of Mahathir's leadership was arguably in the period to 1997, when he was listed as Asia's second most powerful man by *Asiaweek*, and when Asian values and their stock market indices rode high in global media esteem. A grand culmination of a vision appeared in sight, until the Asian Crisis hit and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was unprecedentedly sacked as deputy prime minister of the country.

As his once chosen successor (according to Mahathir), Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, moves ahead with plans to make Malaysia a developed nation by 2020, Mahathir has been unequivocal and unrelenting in his criticism of the new administration. *Off The Edge* speaks with the country's longest-serving premier on his motivations, his legacy, and the prevailing issues of the day.



HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE

In happier times

Eddin Khoo: Tun, you have had a political career surpassing 50 years, and it would have been rather ingenuous of us to think you would pass into blissful retirement. But did you actually anticipate that events, domestic and international, would ensure your involvement in contemporary events would remain as intense as they have been?

Well, perhaps not as intense, but I cannot imagine myself not showing some interest in what is happening around me, whether local or foreign. Sometimes, I would make comments simply because people want to know what I think about things.

Jason Tan: When you made the shock announcement of your resignation at the 2002 Umno General Assembly, you never really got to complete your speech, which must have been very carefully considered. Do you wish you had been given a chance to fully explain the reasons for your decision, and how relevant are they now?

The explanation was adequate. Actually, I didn't have much to say. I look back at what I said in that last speech and was surprised myself, that I spoke quite a lot on numerous issues. But towards the end, I just said I wanted to make an announcement, and all I wanted to do was to say, 'I am stepping down'.

Of course, I couldn't very well explain

there why I was stepping down, but I have always thought that a person should not overstay his welcome. I had been there 22 years – 21 years, actually – and I thought that was long enough.

And I'm quite sure there would be people thinking, 'When is this fellow going to go off? He's been around too long.' And there was no way for them to know what would happen after [I stepped down], since they couldn't compare that with what had happened before. But most people think that a change is good. So I thought, before people tell me 'please go off'... I would rather not be shooed off. I prefer to make my own exit.

EK: Domestic events in 2006 were dominated by your criticisms of the Abdullah administration. There have been many observations and analyses, but some have perceived the episode as principally a clash of personalities and leadership styles that has, however, distracted from the many reforms – political, institutional, economic – that PM Abdullah has pledged to initiate. What is your response to such observations?

I am very disappointed that people think this is personal, that I feel slighted or unhappy about things. I do feel unhappy, but it is not due to anything personal. I think that what was done [in the matter of the scenic bridge] was degrading for this country. For this country to submit to the

demands of other countries without even testing them is wrong. We have lost our sovereignty, our right to do things within our own territory. Once you give up that right, you really are no longer independent.

And I thought the people would see the point of why this was wrong, but instead, they prefer to see this as a conflict between myself and the present Prime Minister.

It is not a conflict, it is on this issue. And not only that, but on the matter of AP's and many other things [that have been done] that I thought were wrong.

I didn't want to comment on the good intentions. Of course, there was the intention to be more transparent, that everything should be tendered out properly, that there needed to be a better delivery system. These are political promises, but they have not shown up.

Even recently when people conducted a study of his (PM Abdullah's) prime ministership, people who are not against him commented that his promises were good but they were not implemented. And they were not implemented simply because there is really no effort.... We know that certain projects have been given out, but we don't see advertisements for tenders. For example, the [Second] Penang Bridge, which is supposed to be given to UEM, I think... there was no real tender [for the project]. So, on the one hand he says something, but on the other hand

he doesn't do it. Promises are fine. Any politician can say 'I want to reform, I want to do this and that', but the test of things is what is really done.

EK: You have stated in your criticisms that when you appointed PM Abdullah as your successor, you essentially expected 'continuity'...

Not continuity in that sense.

This is the same government, same party, you don't reverse a party's decision, because when a new government takes over and reverses a decision that has already been taken, that is very bad. You can start something new for the future, but you cannot go back and reverse what has been done before, because if you do that, you lose credibility.

That is where I think he (Prime Minister Abdullah) went wrong. Somebody has invested in this country, an agreement has been made, the money was given back to the investor, saying, 'Well, there's something wrong with the agreement, so we are not accepting your participation.' That kind of thing makes the government lose credibility. There is a flip-flop, and that is very bad. But if you want to do something for the future, by all means, do whatever you like, but these things have been agreed upon.

EK: Do you regard many of PM Abdullah's pledges for reforms as being a challenge to your legacy or a questioning of your administration?

No, [not] if it's done for the future. But when things have already been decided and you reverse them, it is very bad. I see this happening in some countries where when a change of government takes place, the new government invariably accuses the previous government of corruption and therefore reverses [decisions]. When you do that, you can expect the next government to come in and reverse your decision, and the people will have no confidence.

EK: What about PM Abdullah's explanation that the country really needed a new perspective on development, one that is less about infrastructure and more holistic?

Well, by all means do that, but what has already been decided [upon] must be carried out. Of course, even if you want to do something new, it does not mean what is new is good. If you have money but you don't spend the money, you don't create wealth. And this country has lots of money... I have kept on pointing out that this country has lots of money. But when you keep the money, nobody is going to benefit, [and] money decreases in its purchasing power because of inflation. It is better to spend the money. In fact, most countries spend more than what they have. Because today's price is

lower than the price of the future.

JT: Presumably, then, that is one of the reasons why you embarked on the projects and spent the money in the way you did...

Yes, but we had the money. You know, when I left, there were four things I decided I should do before I stepped down, because I had the privilege, or pleasure, of stepping down in my own time; nobody was forcing me, so I could plan.

I wanted the country to be politically stable; it must be economically stable; I wanted the party which is forming the government to be stable; and I wanted the finances of the country to be in good shape.

These four were assured.

I was shocked when I was told we had no money. We have plenty of money. All those things that were built, we didn't borrow money. This country has the lowest borrowing rate. Yes, there is a deficit and all that, but the rate of borrowing must be fixed below a certain percentage; we are not like America, which has borrowings [that are] more than its total revenue.

Ya, we built Putrajaya – has it made the country bankrupt? We built the [Petronas] towers – it didn't make the country bankrupt. I know for a fact that Petronas, for example, earns huge sums of money. I was in charge of Petronas, I know how much Petronas is making – it's making even more now.

During my time, the highest amount earned by Petronas was RM26 billion; the last figure I got was RM86 billion, because the price of oil went up. So, there's plenty

of money; but to tell people, 'We have no money, we cannot do it, sorry you're not getting any more contracts because we have no money' – that is not being truthful.

JT: Tun Musa Hitam has opined (OTE, Nov 2005) that you are a man 'of tremendous vision and supreme confidence' who wanted to 'catapult' the country into becoming a modern, industrialised economy, but that you became 'intolerant' – a lot of things were done because you 'wanted them done yesterday'. He further opines that many of these big projects would come to be seen as wrong in hindsight. On reflection, would you have embarked on modernising Malaysia differently?

If you look at what has been done, is it wrong? Suppose I didn't embark on the monorail and the LRT, you know what kind of traffic jams we would have now? Supposing I didn't do the North-South highway, do you think the country would grow? All along the roads you can see development, from Johor Baru right up to Bukit Kayu Hitam. If I didn't build KLIA, what would have happened to [air] traffic? Are we going to stay in Subang?

All these are necessary things and we did it with our money... we had the money. We didn't borrow. Even when we borrowed, we borrowed from the Japanese, who gave a loan at 0.7% interest repayable over 40 years – we would be stupid not to accept.

Does Musa know about this? If he says I'm 'intolerant', my God, he went against me, and yet I brought him back, gave him jobs.



Highways traversing city and country are a lasting legacy of the Mahathir era. Pictured above is the Ampang elevated highway



I didn't cut him off. I didn't, for example, prevent him from making speeches, as I am now being prevented. I am not allowed to make speeches. People who invite me have been asked to withdraw their invitations. So who is being intolerant?

EK: When you proclaimed the blueprint for Wawasan 2020, you spoke of achieving a united Malaysian nation. More recently, we have people as senior as the Menteri Besar of Johor, Datuk Seri Abdul Ghani Othman, rejecting the concept of Bangsa Malaysia. How do you think this bodes for a united Malaysian nation in 2020?

When you have a multiracial society, the top end must know how to handle race relations in the country. During my time, I had no problem. Sometimes I criticised the non-Malays, sometimes I criticised the Malays; and I didn't get petitions [on religious freedom] sent to me, or on the rejection of a Malaysian nationality, and things like that.

But when you have a leadership that is unable to give proper direction to determine targets and objectives, then people come up with all kinds of statements all on their own – Ghani makes a statement at the Umno General Assembly; people talk in a way that is not responsible; and you find also in the Chinese community people saying things that they shouldn't; you have Ministers sending petitions to the Prime Minister – all these things happen if you are not able to manage properly.

I had good relations with all the leaders in my Cabinet; I had no problem. These things did not happen during my time, and I was there for 22 years, not three years. Yes, I had problems with Chinese educationists trying to stir up racial sentiment, but that was not picked up by others, it was just this particular group.

EK: You mention giving a sense of direction – that could be interpreted, of course, as 'strong leadership', which, during your administration, was often read as authoritarian. Do you think this country desires that?

I think if you want to develop a developing country, you need a real sense of direction. If somebody doesn't give you a sense of direction, everybody would be going all over the place and nothing can be done. When you give direction, that direction may be wrong; but if you don't give direction, some of the things they do *will* be wrong. If you are going in 10 separate ways, nine of them would be wrong. It is far better to give direction, and if it is wrong, well, as you go along, you correct it.

When I decided to build a national car, people said it was 'stupid' – 'You are a Third World country, how can you build a car?' Well, there were problems along the

way, but as you go along, you solve [them]. That's what leadership is all about! If you don't know how to solve problems, then you shouldn't be a leader.

EK: You mention earlier speeches made at the recent Umno General Assembly. The general public expressed shock and dismay at some that were made, especially those by younger delegates, which were perceived to be threatening, extreme, even menacing to communal stability in Malaysia. Many of these delegates grew to Umno in the Mahathir epoch. What do you think their anxieties are?

The question you should ask is, why didn't they say those things during my time? Because there was no necessity; because if they had a concern, they could come to me. But when you have a leader who says, 'You have to support everything that I say, and if you say anything against me, you are going to be punished', then people are going to try and criticise something else.

Then they come up with violent statements and all that, because there is nothing else that they can say. What else can they say? You cannot debate, for example, 'Why didn't you build the bridge, why is it you gave so many APs?' That you must not talk. 'Why is the speech very flat?' You can't say that.

So, what do you say? You say something else. And it is unfortunate that these people – you cannot blame me because they were people who came up during my time, but not all; a lot of them are very new people – but before, they saw no necessity to sound like that.

EK: Could it be because they feared you?

Perhaps they feared me, but, to a certain extent, I think they accepted my leadership. They don't fear me. What do I do? Do I haul them up? Nowadays, if you say anything against the Prime Minister, you are going to be hauled up. You have to praise his speech. During my time, they were critical of my speech, they said a lot of things against me, even rejected some of my ideas. That's all right. To say they were frightened of me is wrong; they are frightened now! There is a definite climate of fear today, that if you do something you won't get contracts, you won't get chosen to be candidates, that's what they're saying.

EK: So you don't believe that those statements were a reflection of deeper anxieties within the Malay community?

There is anxiety, but there are other ways of expressing it.

EK: At present we are going through a period of great transition, where many of our fundamental institutions are

being challenged. Recently there was the Asli report, which challenged the figures for wealth redistribution; once firm advocates of the NEP such as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim have called for the dismantling of the policy. In the last years of your Premiership, you too were very critical of Malay attitudes, which you said had created a culture of dependency.

Do you believe affirmative action policies are still integral to our country? In some areas, yes; because a time for adjustment is needed. In other areas, where the privileges or opportunities given are not being utilised, my view is that you cannot expect people to just wait for you to be serious. If you are going to be Mat Rempit and you cannot be bothered to study, you cannot expect other people not to go to university, waiting for you while you play around. That, I will not accept. But there are certain areas where we need to give, still, some priorities. That will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

EK: But these will have to be shaped and gradually dismantled over time...

Yes, it should be dismantled over time... it's not supposed to be permanent anyway, but we accept, we tolerate the fact that they (bumiputera) were not able to make use of opportunities within the time period. Okay, we extend it, that's the usual thing to do. If you find that something is not being achieved, you give time. But over time, if you are not serious about [taking up the opportunities given], then sorry, we have to withdraw.

JJ: Speaking of Malay attitudes – Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim has remarked on the Malay psyche, stating that it can only support winners, and that you mistook this support for genuine endorsement and understanding of your vision.

Have Malay leaders failed their people or vice versa? And what still needs to be done to galvanise the people to face global competition?

Well, some leaders have failed, some followers have failed. Of course, you can't say this is entirely a leadership matter. During my time, there were lots of Malays who did very well; so well, in fact, that they, lacking any opportunities in Malaysia now, have gone abroad without the privilege of the NEP, and they have been able to compete and deliver.

Which means that during the period when they were given the opportunity, they had learnt, and now they're using their knowledge. But a lot more are not learning, not taking the trouble, because they think the NEP is going to be around, 'so when I am ready, I will use it'. Now, that kind of attitude cannot be tolerated.

'IF YOU WANT TO DEVELOP A DEVELOPING COUNTRY, YOU NEED A REAL SENSE OF DIRECTION... IF YOU ARE GOING IN 10 SEPARATE WAYS, NINE OF THEM WOULD BE WRONG.'

EK: You commented in your interview in *Time* magazine that a lack of direction in religious matters has led to a rise in conservative forces within Islam. Disputes concerning religious matters were frequent in Malaysia over the past year.

What is your perception of advocacy groups such as Article 11, the Murthi and Ayappan 'rebut mayat' cases, and panic attacks involving alleged conversion of Muslims? What do these issues reflect?

These are expressions by people who are really not very knowledgeable. I describe myself as a Muslim fundamentalist, in the sense that I go back to the basics. The problem that we have now is that there are too many interpreters of religions, and their interpretations are not always right. One man will give one interpretation, someone else another.

If you were to follow these people, you are going to be wrong because you don't know which of them is right. It is far better to go back to the basic teachings. Now, on the question of whether a person is a Muslim or not, you go to the Quran and find out. What is the actual teaching? You can't listen to these people who make Islam a very rigid religion, and that is what is happening now – then the government doesn't give proper direction.

During my time, I spelt out why we reject hudud – it is because it is not hudud, it is PAS' interpretation of hudud; because in the Quran, for example, the stress is on justice. Whenever you judge, judge with justice, but these people are more interested in the severity of the punishment – chopping hands, chopping heads, that a trial must have four witnesses. These are not Quranic, it is their interpretation. I'm not going to follow them.

So, we have to tell people, 'Look, this is what we're doing, and what we're doing is compatible with the teachings of Islam.' But when you come up with a new-fangled idea like Islam Hadhari and all that, people say, 'Look, there is only one Islam', you don't have Islam this and that, or modern Islam. There is no modern Islam; it is the same Islam that is applicable through the ages.

EK: The Abdullah administration is very firm in its belief that Islam Hadhari can assuage religious tension, but you have been very critical of it even though many of its principles are very reasonable,

moderate and temperate. Why are you so critical of it?

Because Islam without being Hadhari is already temperate and moderate. If you go back to the fundamentals, for example, in law, as I mentioned earlier, the main thing that is stressed by Islam is justice, not the chopping of hands and heads, not trial with four witnesses, but justice!

So what reason is there to say, 'We have to change now, we have to have justice'? It's been there all the time. And if you read the Quran, you will find that the guidance there is suitable not 1,400 years ago, it is suitable now. So you don't have to introduce a new Islam called Islam Hadhari; it confuses people.

EK: PM Abdullah, however, asserts that it is not a new Islam, it is a matter of Islamic principles...

There is no need to give it a new name; just say this is Islam...

EK: How do you compare Islam Hadhari with your efforts at 'menerap nilai-nilai Islam' (inculcating Islamic values), practised during your administration?

It (inculcation of Islamic values) is the same nilai Islam (Islamic values) found in the fundamental teachings of Islam – you have to be honest; you have to have amanah (trustworthiness); when you undertake to do something, you have to honour your word... These things are there for all time, it is not new; you don't have to say it is modern Islam...

The Islam that was taught by the Prophet is the same Islam we're using now – of course, in a different context. At one time, peak caps were regarded as haram. Why? Because you cannot pray... the peak cap gets in the way. Well, then, take off the peak cap or turn it the other way. This is just the view of some people. There is nothing in the Quran that says you cannot wear peak caps when you pray. All you are told to do is, when you pray, your forehead must be on the ground. If something is in between, you just remove it.

JT: But underlying all this discussion on religion and the need for Islam Hadhari is a rise in religiosity. It seems that we are getting more segregated, not just in terms of race, but by religion. There also appears to be a trend to conflate race and religion...

It is a question of handling. The issue was

there before. During my time, it was there. You have to handle this thing in a way that will make people feel confident that they're not going to lose their faith, they're not going to lose their religion.

Islam teaches us, 'To you your religion, to me my religion.' You pray your way, I pray my way. There is no problem living with Chinese, Indians, Hindus or whomever. But why is this cropping up now? It is because people are confused.

JT: Tun, following the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim and the reformasi movement, it appeared that the Malay electorate lost faith in the values of developmental politics and opted instead for ostensibly more pious and religious values, the repercussions of which we still feel now. Can the national aspiration ever be cast in more inclusive, modern and secular terms again, as was done in *Wawasan 2020*?

Not secular. I have always maintained that what we're doing is compatible with Islam. That is why we say we absorb Islamic values, but Islamic values do not reject development – it does not reject development.

If you look at the Muslims who created the great Muslim civilisation – that is development. So, what is the difficulty? You don't have to reject development and become religious. The reason why people are now more religious is because there is a sense that Muslims are being oppressed worldwide. This is not only [happening] in Malaysia.

Now people who never before covered their heads are covering their heads, and you find that [there is a similar response from other religions]. It's a reflection of a certain trend during a certain period. Basically, [the reason] is political.

EK: But surely that doesn't bode well for inter-racial, inter-faith...

You need to explain Islam properly to the Muslims and to the non-Muslims, which is why we started Ikim (Institute of Islamic Understanding), because we found that even Muslims didn't understand their own religion.

There is a need for non-Muslims and Muslims to understand that Islam is not that extreme thing that is being talked about. If people understand Islam, there is no problem. During my time I tried to explain... I understand my religion. I read the Quran many, many times to understand it. So if you handle things properly in a multiracial society, there is no need for conflict.

EK: One of the criticisms of your view of Islam, which you had articulated even early on in your book *The Challenge*, was that even with the setting up of



Ikim, there appeared to be two levels of Islam that were being propagated – Ikim used to have progressive discussions that were closed-door, while your perception of Islamic values was not being permeated down at the grassroots. Do you believe that to be true?

They were not closed-door. They (Ikim) have a broadcasting station, they invite people to come and listen, they invite non-Muslims to participate, and they are very open.

But of course, there are others who are not so open and operate on their own. There will always be this lunatic fringe in any society. You cannot avoid them or obliterate them.

JT: As a result of this debate on religion, there is also the question of fear on the part of the non-Malays. You have time and again talked about the contributions of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, to the Malaysian economy. How do you think their reservations about long-term policies of affirmative action, racial and religious segregation, the ability to secure a good future for their children in this country – how can these best be addressed?

Now, if you look carefully at the Chinese in Malaysia, they have done very well. But if

you pick on one or two who did not do well, of course he's going to complain. You give away 10 scholarships when there are 20 who want them, there will be 10 people who are not happy; you increase the number to 20, there will be 40 people asking and 20 who are not happy. That is unavoidable.

But if you care to really make a quantitative assessment of the Chinese and the Malays, surely you must admit that the Chinese are better off than the Malays. That is a fact. And more Chinese go to universities, more Chinese qualify, than Malays.

We put a special effort, for example, to increase the number of Malay doctors, but only doctors. What about other [fields]? Still, there are more Chinese, more Indians. The Indians are a small community – 10% [of the population] – but they have almost the same number of doctors as the Chinese, who make up 30% of the population.

So, opportunities are there, but if you are going to say, 'Well, I applied for this scholarship but I didn't get it'... well, there are lots of Malays who also applied for scholarships, they come to me and ask if I can help, I try to help, but if there is no scholarship, there is no scholarship.

But it is not right to say that the Chinese are not getting opportunities. That would be wrong. Everybody will find that the

things they want, not all will get.

JT: Of course, the response to that would be that there is a lack of meritocracy in the education system.

Yes, we tried to introduce meritocracy in the education system. Unfortunately, it didn't work well because some very smart people said, 'Well, the Malays have to matriculate, the Chinese have to go for higher [Form Six] examination.' So they tried to cheat on our policy.

The reason why I wanted meritocracy is because we have given opportunities for the Malays, but they are not taking it up. They are not studying. You go to the universities, there are only girls, no boys. In my time, there was one girl to seven boys [in the student population]; now 60-70% percent are girls, which means the boys are not serious. Now, if they are not serious, they cannot expect us to stop others – 'please, we are going to play, please you wait, you wait...' – that is not on! That's why I said go on the basis of meritocracy.

JT: But somehow this was not carried out...

It was not carried out, I'm sorry to say, because some people can still get around even government policies.



EK: Tun, your view of the Bush-Blair alliance and the war in Iraq is well-known. At the same time you have been critical of Muslim attitudes and their weaknesses. The scholar Tariq Ramadan, meanwhile, has spoken of a 'culture of victimology' permeating among Muslims. Do you believe this to be so?

To a certain extent, as with all such statements, there is always some truth to it, but it is not completely true because the fact is that Muslims are the victims, but they are the victims as a result of their own faults also.

Muslims are enjoined by the Quran to be able to defend themselves; that is one of the things that a Muslim community must do; you have to have the capacity to defend yourself. If you don't have that capacity, you are committing a sin. That's in the Quran. But 400 to 500 years ago, some Muslim scholars said, 'Well, we should only study

religion, we should not study these secular subjects – chemistry, biology... these are not going to give you merit in the next world.'

And so they stopped learning, and what happened was that the Europeans took the learning, the books in the libraries of the Muslims, they studied, they achieved their Renaissance, and they went ahead to develop while the Muslims regressed.

Now, they (the Muslims) don't have the ability to provide for their own defence because they don't have the knowledge. They don't know chemistry, they don't know anything, don't know anything about manufacturing. So it is their fault! Not the fault of Islam. It is the fault of the followers of Islam who misinterpreted the teachings of Islam. So they must accept the blame.

But the fact is that even if you are weak, that doesn't mean other people have the right to step on you because you are weak. We don't go around bullying people because they are weak. That is wrong. So the feeling

that they (Muslims) are victims is genuine, but at the same time, they must admit they also brought this upon themselves.

They (Muslims) have to understand where they went wrong. I have been invited to many places, and one of the things that people are curious about is, how is it that Malaysia, which has a majority Muslim population, a multiracial society, how is it that it remains stable and is able to develop?

And we have to explain – it is based on Islam... the true teachings of Islam. Not the interpretations. The religion says you have to acquire knowledge, so we spend money trying to acquire knowledge. We have to develop our country, to have the capacity to defend ourselves not only in war, but also economy-wise.

So we develop the country, all of which is based on the teachings of Islam. And this is what they (Muslims) have done wrong. They have ignored the fundamental teachings of Islam because of some people making other interpretations.

EK: You have remarked that the root cause of discord between Islam and the West is the Arab-Israeli dispute. Recently, the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, organised a conference in Tehran, which gathered, among others, a leading figure of the Ku Klux Klan.

Meanwhile, in the local press (*Mingguan Malaysia*), a comment was published stating the following: 'If indeed Hitler committed genocide on six million Jews, that would be his greatest contribution to history. Neighbouring Arab states should adopt his modus operandi to wipe Israel off the map of the Middle East.'

What do you think of such attitudes? And how do you think it affects Muslim efforts at constructing a civilised, moderate and enlightened approach to resolving its problems?

Well, you can't take seriously just one man's comment, I mean, it is very shallow to say things like that. It's a sign of frustration, of not knowing a solution to a problem.

He says that, other people say other things, a person like [Tariq] Ramadan says another thing – why not hold to what he (Ramadan) says, rather than this obscure journalist?

So, I don't take this thing seriously – it is just anger, frustration, bitterness. These are the feelings that you see a lot among Muslims because they cannot fight, they are being oppressed, and because they cannot do anything for themselves, they lash out. Tie a bomb to your body and blow yourself up... not a very pleasant thing, but what else do you do? You don't have planes, you don't have tanks, don't have battleships, so the only thing you can do is that. When people are desperate and

they feel they cannot do anything to help themselves, they resort to things that are not quite rational. So, comments like these, I wouldn't care about.

EK: But what happens when a President of Iran provides a platform for such views?

No, what happened was he opened his meeting to everybody – it was a very democratic thing. He does not only invite people who like him, he invites everybody, including Jewish rabbis, and they came and spoke freely about this thing (the Holocaust). And mind you, these people have not been allowed to speak in other places, in other places they are not welcome, so he provides a forum for them. What is wrong with that?

It's just like Bush arranging for a meeting of people who are pro-Bush, who would then sanction all the misdeeds he has committed. Ahmadinejad is providing a forum for the other viewpoint. I think he has done a good job!

EK: At the last major conference organised by the Perdana Leadership Foundation, you gave a very bleak keynote address. You have now dedicated yourself to the struggle for peace, but if I recall the tone of that address, our choice was basically peace or annihilation. Has the world really arrived at such a fate?

Well, it will come... it will come. The capacity to destroy the world is there now – real physical capacity. Ten thousand nuclear warheads in the US, another 6,000 in Russia, and I don't know how many the British, French and Israelis have.

The capacity to destroy the whole world is there, but do you want to do it? If you don't reject war, one day somebody is going to press a button, maybe accidentally. Maybe another person like Bush might become President, he might press a button because he doesn't know what he is doing, and he's going to destroy the world.

So the best thing is, let us get rid of all these things. Let's not make war an option in the solution to disputes between nations. That's what we're trying to say.

JT: Tun, can I draw you back into some more local issues and on matters of perception of your leadership – for example, of the rule of law and the judiciary, and whether there should be a reopening of the inquiry into the dismissal of former Lord President Tun Salleh Abas. The public perception is that members of the judiciary were removed for political reasons. Would you like to comment on this?

In the first place, you are wrong to say that members of the judiciary were removed

for political reasons. There were perfect legal reasons for their removal. It was not a kangaroo court. They had to set up a tribunal, bring in a foreign judge, Tun Salleh Abas was asked to appear and he didn't want to. As a result, those people (the tribunal) arrived at their conclusion according to the law. And when the other judges tried to nullify the decision of the tribunal – but there is no provision for nullifying the decision of the tribunal – that is against the law, and they were removed because they went against the law.

It is not as if I said, 'Remove this chap, remove that chap.' I have no capacity to do that. But of course, that is a popular political assumption because politically, it would be good for them to say I did this thing because of politics.

They refuse to say that this was done according to the Constitution and the laws of this country. Show me where this had been done by me without regard for the law. Today, yes, there is disregard for the law, because police officers are calling people who invite you to speak... and telling them, 'Please withdraw the invitation'. And that is against the law, because there is no provision in the law that says a police officer can ask somebody to withdraw an invitation to me.

But even if I put people under detention, they are detained under the ISA – it's bad law, but it is law. I have never done anything against the law.

JT: So you consider it bad law, the ISA?

Well, lots of people say it's a bad law, and we tried to amend it, but the police say it is necessary and, to a certain extent, we have to also respect police views because they are the enforcers.

JT: There is also the question of such laws, as the Internal Security Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secrets Act, with judicial ouster clauses that preclude decisions made under them from being reviewed by the judiciary. What are your comments on the necessity of these laws and the criticisms of them?

If the people really believe that these laws are bad and want to remove them, then elect people who say these are bad laws. But the people have been electing the same people who support this law. We give people the right to make a decision and they think, 'Well, it's all right, this law'. They're not even worried; it's not even an issue during elections. If you go up there and make a speech against the ISA, you're not going to win votes, which means that the people support it, indirectly.

EK: There are now instances of people who have come up in politics who have recently been critical of you.

Alternatively, people who were severely critical of you in the past – John Pilger, Tariq Ali – are now very much on your side. How do you perceive this paradox? I don't believe in supporting a person because of that person; I believe in supporting a person because of what he does.

I'm not against the US; I'm against its policies, and I expect myself to be supported or rejected based on what I do, not because I am Dr Mahathir, 'therefore, even if he goes around murdering people, he is Dr Mahathir, you know, so he can murder people'. I don't think so.

To me, it is what you do that is important. If people think what I'm doing is right, and want to support, they're at liberty. If they think what I'm doing is wrong – even though they might have been appointed by me before, used to kiss my hands and things like that – [if they] now they want to kiss other hands, they're welcome to it. I'm not worried.

EK: In conclusion, you have been consistently described as possessing a combative style of politics, but you are now a man who has dedicated himself to peace. Did you have to make adaptations to your temperament for this?

I'm still combative where it warrants combativeness. I say things about Bush – call him a war criminal and terrorist, but at the same time, I talk about peace. I don't see anything wrong in that. If my peace effort succeeds, then there won't be people like Bush.

JT: Tun, I'm duty-bound to ask this question, again about how you're currently perceived by the public. Your criticism of a 30-year-old politician, Khairy Jamaluddin. People are wondering, why are you doing this?

...You know, during my time I didn't allow my children to be involved in politics. They were proposed to be candidates, I turned it down; they wanted to do business, I said do business outside the government or outside the country. ■

Turn to page 25 for information on the Perdana Global Peace Organisation's conference and exhibition, *Expose War Crimes*, in support of the Kuala Lumpur Initiative to Criminalise War.