

# As Others See Him

**Malaysian Business** finds out what leading government and corporate leaders think about Dr Mahathir.

By Seelen Sakran

**W**HAT best describes Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad? For sure, he is savvy, meticulous, articulate and a no-nonsense person. But beyond that, he is a man known for his visionary plans.

In his 22 years of heading the country, his prescriptions have steered the nation away from economic doldrums and from becoming too dependent on the West, to one having an Asian identity – a nation that is not afraid to speak out.

**Malaysian Business** elicits the opinions of the country's top government and business leaders with regard to Dr Mahathir and his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. They were asked questions ranging from memorable moments with Dr Mahathir to his greatest achievements for the corporate and public sectors, and the main economic challenges faced by Abdullah.



**ROBERT KUOK**  
(Chairman, Kuok Group)

Under Dr Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia has developed from being an exporter of basic commodities into a modern and industrialised state. His greatest contribution has been to nurture strong economic growth and stability, which have given the corporate sector the opportunity to develop and grow.

Given his inimitable style, all encounters with Dr Mahathir have been memorable and different. It is difficult to pick out any one.

Under his progressive leadership, the economy has experienced rapid growth which has brought greater business opportunities to all sectors and businesses including the Kuok Group.

The economic disparity between the affluent urban areas and the relatively un-

developed rural countryside is growing. The main economic challenge for Abdullah will be to ensure that the peanut butter is more equitably spread over the bread, perhaps by encouraging industries to the poorer parts of the country.

Sound fiscal and socio-economic policies will be of increasing importance and the effective implementation of these policies will be crucial to achieving results. Tourism, and especially eco-tourism, offers tremendous opportunities to help address this imbalance and the country has much to offer in this regard.



**TAN SRI AZMAN HASHIM** (Executive Chairman, Arab Malaysian Corporation Bhd)

Being very business-friendly, Dr Mahathir has given much support and encouragement to the corporate sector. This



Incorporated that would work towards the speedy industrialisation of the country

July 1985 Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd rolls out the country's first national car, the Proton Saga

April 1987 Umno members vote for continuity by rejecting a major challenge to Dr Mahathir by Tengku

Razaleigh Hamzah. Dr Mahathir wins by 43 votes

Feb 1988 Announces the registration of Umno Baru. The party replaces the old Umno, deregistered in the wake of the High Court's decision declaring it unlawful



has enabled it to succeed and have the self-confidence to compete internationally.

I have many memories of Dr Mahathir, but would like to highlight one that demonstrates his sensitiveness to the feelings of others.

As Chairman of Malaysia South-South Association (MASSA), I was leading the business group accompanying the Prime Minister on one of his trips to developing countries. On one occasion at a dinner in Tehran, where leading Iranian personalities were present, I was asked to speak on behalf of our business delegation. In my speech, I was trying to be funny and made jokes about events we had experienced in Uzbekistan, which we had earlier visited.

I saw Abdullah, who was then our Foreign Minister and seated next to the Prime Minister, walking briskly towards the rostrum. He handed me a slip of paper. On it was the Prime Minister's handwriting saying I should not make jokes about the Uzbeks in front of the Iranians. Of course, that ended my speech rather abruptly.

To me, this showed how alert and sensitive Dr Mahathir was. He had to be in order that the right things were said and done and sensitivities were not hurt.

I also recall him saying that he had to maintain a smiling face as otherwise people might think he was unhappy, too serious or even angry. But even this has its drawbacks.

For instance, on one occasion he went to an embassy to sign the condolence book on the demise of the country's leader. Just as he had finished signing, the camera flashed and he smiled, an automatic reaction for him. In this case, it was rather unfortunate as the next day, his picture appeared in the newspapers showing him signing the condolence book with a big smile!

The AmBank Group has progressed and prospered during Dr Mahathir's period in office. He provided the economic and political environment for the private sector to succeed.

Abdullah will do well. He has the ability and the experience. Of course, he will have his own style and ways, as what it should be.

**DATUK ROBIN SEO** (*Vice President and Country Manager, Motorola Malaysia*)

In recent years, the ringgit peg of 3.8 to the US dollar has probably been the greatest help to the industry because it stabilised the currency, which was gyrating so much that it was rather difficult for the industry to concentrate on its core activities. It also set the stage for better competitiveness against the other countries in Asia.

Dr Mahathir's policies have always been pro-industry. They also ensure political stability and security of investment, which made our jobs easier in lobbying for investment into Malaysia.

The main challenges will arise if the global economy, especially US and Japan, fail to turn around and the China economy slows down. Export business will be grossly affected if that happened, and it would be a challenge since Malaysia is predominantly an export economy.



**TAN SRI RAMON NAVARATNAM** (*Special Adviser, Sunway Group*)

Dr Mahathir has put Malaysia on the world map. The public sector has taken the lead in the rapid development of the country from an agricultural to a modern manufacturing one,

with good potential to move forward to industrialised status.

The private sector has been able to expand only because of the generally sound public policies that have encouraged large foreign direct investment and domestic investment.

Abdullah will face the challenges of sustaining and strengthening national unity and introducing more competition and meritocracy to enable Malaysia to face the growing challenges from globalisation and China. He has also to counter polarisation, corruption, extremism, and promote equity and justice more purposefully for all Malaysians.



**TAN SRI ALI ABUL HASSAN** (*Special Adviser to the Prime Minister*)

In his 22 years as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has propelled Malaysia into another paradigm. His leadership has had a significant influence on every facet of Malaysia, from politics, economy, social, education, infrastructure and religion to unity and broader humanitarian issues. It would be difficult to find one generic term to explain his greatest achievement.

From day one, Dr Mahathir felt that the civil service had to adopt the role of 'facilitator' in the development process of the country. They had to be able to cope with the demanding phase of implementing the New Economic Policy.

The key aspect is how quickly the new Prime Minister creates his own imprint and the manner in which it is done. The second challenge he would face is having his leadership tested by both local and foreign organisations, institutions



**Jan 1989** Undergoes coronary bypass operation at the National Heart Institute in Kuala Lumpur

**1990** Moots the idea of East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) as a forum to discuss common economic problems faced by East Asian nations

**1991** Vision 2020 becomes the ultimate mission for the Malaysian

**Government** – to turn Malaysia into a developed nation by that year

**Feb 1991** Launches Sabah Umno and announces the appointment of Umno deputy president Ghafar Baba to the post of liaison chairman

**Jan 1994** Tables the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 1993 to limit the legal immunity of the Malay Rulers

**Sept 1994** Becomes Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister. He completes 13 years, one month and 23 days

**Dec 1994** Appoints Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister, replacing Ghafar Baba who resigned on Oct 15

**April 1995** Leads the Barisan Nasional to power in Malaysia's

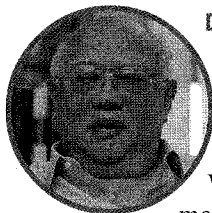
and other governments. The third challenge is the selection of his team to attain the goals, politically, economically, and so forth, for the development of the nation.



**TAN SRI AHMAD SARJI** (*Chairman, Permodalan Nasional Bhd*)

The nation accepts the nine challenges embodied in Vision 2020, which gives an insight into the direction the nation needs to move.

The main economic challenges facing the country have been outlined in the report of the National Economic Consultative Council (NEAC) II. Two main challenges are enhancing the competitiveness of the Malaysian economy in the face of globalisation, and meeting the targets of the NEAC, in particular the restructuring of society.



**DATUK TAN CHIN NAM** (*Founder, Tan & Tan Group*)

Dr Mahathir could have earned Western plaudits as a mainstream, responsible, international statesman if he had followed the International Monetary Fund's prescriptions during the economic crisis of 1997 and 1998. Corporate Malaysia owes him gratitude for sidestepping an ego and economic trap.

Dr Mahathir and I have met a few times, but no personal episode stands out.

A specific challenge facing Abdullah will be in maintaining Malaysian competitiveness in the upcoming era of major trade liberalisation.



**DATUK ALAN TONG KOK MAU** (*Group Executive Chairman, Bukit Kiara Properties Sdn Bhd*)

I was very touched when Dr Mahathir personally pointed out that I had sold off my former public-listed property company in 1996. I was further touched when, during the FIABCI (International Real Estate Federation) World Congress, he told me that he thought I had retired when I made a comeback to the building industry under the Bukit Kiara Group.

The greatest economic challenge I foresee for Abdullah is how to make Malaysia more prosperous against the very competitive global environment. How will the new Prime Minister urge the public sector to provide all the necessary support to enable the private sector to compete globally?



**DATUK GURDIAL SINGH GILL** (*Founder, GS Gill Sdn Bhd*)

Dr Mahathir's greatest achievement is putting Malaysia on the world map.

My most memorable moment with him was when I travelled with him to Australia and New Zealand and also to Pakistan way back in 1987. He was highly honoured by the countries we visited.

I had the pleasure of working with Abdullah at the NEAC and have known him as a very straightforward and honest man. For the last one year, Abdullah had been acting for the Prime Minister and he certainly did a very good job.



**DATUK TAN TEONG HEAN** (*Chief Executive Director, Southern Bank Bhd*)

Dr Mahathir's successful industrialisation policy placed the corporate sector at the forefront of dramatic change. It moved the economy away from primary commodities and saw the expansion of manufacturing, privatisation as well as the unprecedented opening up of the economy to foreign direct investment.

The result was that the number of publicly listed corporations on the KLSE more than tripled over the past 22 years. Southern Bank prospered along with the tremendous transformation and growth that Dr Mahathir brought to the economy.

Abdullah will encounter three main challenges as Prime Minister:

- (i) The era of low cost, profitable low-end manufacturing that Malaysia enjoyed over the last 20 years is over;
- (ii) The fierce competition for FDI with many investor-friendly economies, particularly the two giants in the Asian bloc, China and India, will create discontinuities for the Malaysian economy; and
- (iii) The threats posed and opportunities presented by the WTO and Afta.

**PETER CHOONG** (*Country Manager, Intel Electronics (M) Sdn Bhd*)

Intel has had an excellent working relationship with the Malaysian Government throughout our 31 years in Malaysia. Dr Mahathir has tremendously changed the landscape of Malaysia by bringing innovations that led the country to become a more industrialised nation.

The establishment of the Multimedia



ninth general election

**May 1996** Officiates at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Multimedia Super Corridor or the Silicon Valley of the East

**May 1997** For the first time, Dr Mahathir goes on two months' leave. He appoints his deputy Anwar Ibrahim as Acting Prime Minister

**June 1998** The KL International Airport is launched

**Sept 1998** Announces foreign exchange and capital controls.

**Sept 1998** Takes over as the Finance Minister after sacking Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister

**Jan 1999** Hands over Home Af-

Super Corridor is proof of his leadership and forward-looking approach in making Malaysia more competitive on the global scene.

Intel is committed to helping the country to move up the value chain. We will also continue to work with the government in driving and promoting ICT adoption.



**DATUK KASI KL PALANIAPPAN**

*(Executive Director, MK Land Holdings Bhd)*

Dr Mahathir's greatest achievements are to provide a long-term vision for Malaysia till 2020, and the introduction of the privatisation policy.

Briefing him on development projects on several occasions, I noticed that in spite of his workload, his memory was good. He would remember the earlier briefings and ask relevant questions. The Malaysian economy grew tremendously under his leadership.

Abdullah's greatest challenge is to instil confidence in the corporate sector and foreign investors that there will be no major change in economic policies and that the country will continue to be pro-business.

He would also need to articulate with vision how Malaysia would position itself and where Malaysia aims to be in future with the structural changes in the world economy.



**TOSHIHIKO SAKABE** *(Malaysian Representative, Matsushita Group)*

One of his greatest contributions, which we greatly benefited from, was his Look East

policy. This was aimed at learning and emulating useful elements, mainly from the Japanese business culture, including the Japanese work ethic.

The policy gives well with our business objective to enhance the quality of life throughout the world through improving the well-being of people.

One of the main economic challenges facing Abdullah is to have a sustainable Malaysian manufacturing industry that is resilient enough to continue leading and propelling growth.



**TAN SRI YEOH TIONG LAY**

*(Chairman, YTL Corporation Bhd)*

Dr Mahathir has brought to the open the ethnic issues in the country and provided guidance to ensure harmony and unity. He has liberated the minds of Malaysians and given them confidence in meeting new challenges, something unthinkable before.

He has also put Malaysia on the world map and instilled pride in Malaysians. I feel these efforts are fundamental to the other achievements.

We are very glad that the Government, under the leadership of Dr Mahathir, has provided us opportunities to develop and prove our capability in infrastructural development.

Our focus, in the future, will be on increasing efficiency and in higher-skills areas. We may have to be more liberal and proactive in our local and foreign talent policies, to focus on research and development in related activities where our natural resource strengths are, or in areas where we are already at par or ahead of others in the region, and to instill a

more hands-on workforce and culture.

These may have socio-political impacts. I am confident Abdullah, with his tremendous experience in government, will have no problem meeting these challenges.



**DATUK MUSTAPHA MOHAMED**

*(Executive Director, NEAC)*

One of Dr Mahathir's greatest achievements was to restore our dignity as a nation. From a small, insignificant ex-British colony trying to survive, we have made our mark in the world.

He has enabled us to raise our heads and to believe in our own ability. His 22-year tenure as prime minister has propelled us at least 50 years ahead in terms of achievement and progress.

The Mahathir administration stressed efficiency, responsibility, accountability and good governance. Many ministries and departments have benchmarked themselves against best practices and been awarded ISO recognition.

Privatisation has made our public service smaller and more manageable, saving the government billions of ringgit in the process. Of course, there is still room for improvement, such as quality of service especially at counters.



**DATUK KRISHNAN TAN** *(Managing Director, IJM Bhd)*

Dr Mahathir's greatest achievement is in giving us the confidence to do new things and venture into new markets, just like what IJM has done. **mb**



fairs portfolio to the newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Nov 1999 Leads the Barisan Nasional into the 10th general election. BN secures its two-thirds in the 193-seat Parliament

June 22, 2002 Shocks the nation by announcing his sudden res-



ignation from Umno and the Barisan Nasional, at the Umno General Assembly

2003 Promotes the use of gold dinar for international trade amongst Muslim nations to lessen dependency on the US dollar

Oct 31, 2003 Hands over Premiership to Abdullah **mb**