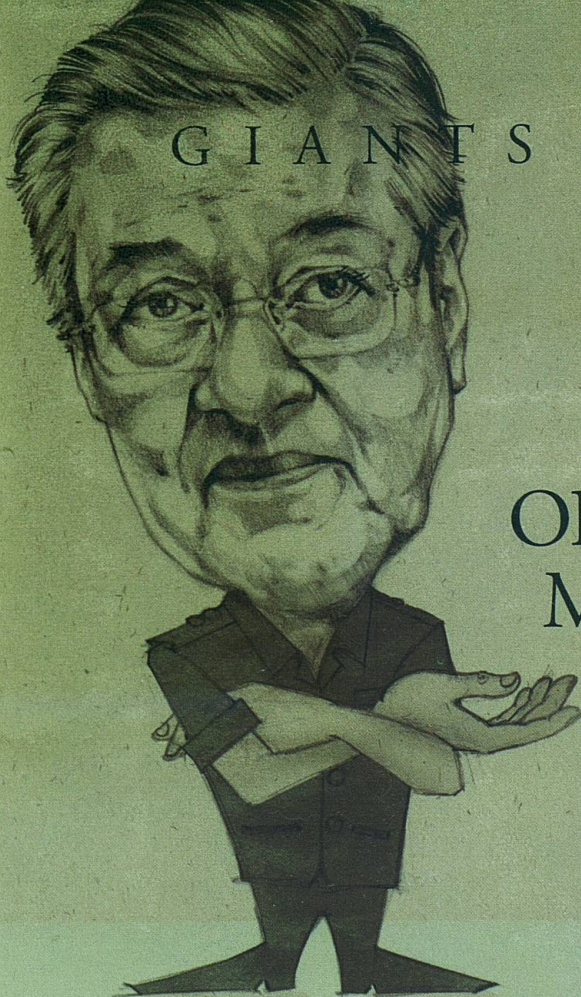


GIANTS of ASIA



DOCTOR M:
OPERATION
MALAYSIA

conversations with

MAHATHIR
MOHAMAD

TOM PLATE

Author of the bestselling

Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew

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LA

“When the economy was growing rapidly, most Malaysians were willing to ignore the darker side of Mahathir’s one-man rule. ... But no more. Still, Dr ‘M’ is a fascinating figure—controversial, outspoken, and never boring. ... Long before Barack Obama, he was telling his people ‘yes, we can.’ (*Malaysia boleh.*) His legacy will be that of a bold, visionary, but ultimately flawed leader.”

*John R. Malott,
U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia, 1995–98*

“He was an outstanding Prime Minister of Malaysia. During his premiership of over 20 years, he changed Malaysia from an agricultural, placid society into an industrial, dynamic society. He educated his people, sent many abroad on scholarships. They in turn transformed Malaysia.”

*Lee Kuan Yew,
Prime Minister of Singapore, 1959–90*

“Tun Dr Mahathir’s legacy would be much more creditable if his many achievements in the international arena and in developing our domestic infrastructure could have been enhanced by his building up strong institutions, rather than weakening them. If he had done so, Malaysia would be a much better, more united, and more progressive country, and a real example of a successful multiracial-religious country.”

*Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam,
former Deputy Secretary,
Ministry of Finance, Malaysia*

G A N T S *o f* A S I A

TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD



DOCTOR M:
OPERATION
MALAYSIA

conversations with

MAHATHIR
MOHAMAD

TOM PLATE

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Asked what they
thought about
**DR MAHATHIR
MOHAMAD**
and his legacy,
here are what these
world figures and
experts had to say.

“When the economy was growing rapidly, most Malaysians were willing to ignore the darker side of Mahathir’s one-man rule: the no-bid contracts awarded to cronies, the lack of transparency, the restrictions on political freedom, the decline in Malaysia’s educational system and quality of governance, and the squandering of public monies on failed projects from Proton to Perwaja to Putrajaya. But no more. Still, ‘Dr M’ is a fascinating figure—controversial, outspoken, and never boring. He ranks with Tunku Abdul Rahman as Malaysia’s most transformational leader. Long before Barack Obama, he was telling his people ‘yes, we can.’ (*Malaysia boleh.*) His legacy will be that of a bold, visionary, but ultimately flawed leader.”

*John R. Malott,
U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia, 1995–98*

“Dr Mahathir Mohamad is an international figure who still exerts a great influence in many fields. His achievements are recognized not only at the Malaysian level. He has demonstrated how persistence, hard work and vision are omnipotent to guarantee success. His rare sense of patriotism and moderate religious beliefs have played a major role in his openness to other cultures and to his keen interest to develop the education process in Malaysia and to make it more accessible to the population. His political and development approach is considered by many politicians and leaders as a model reflecting his deep commitment to create a just and equal society.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a strong proponent of moderate Islam and has practically proved how Islam, when understood well and implemented correctly, can be a driving factor for development and progress. He is a man who believes that Islam can be integrated into all affairs of life and is compatible with the universal concepts of justice and human rights. This is reflected in his ability to evolve coexistence between different religions and ethnic groups in Malaysia and in his respect for others' beliefs."

*His Excellency Dr Abu Baker Al-Qirbi,
Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Republic of Yemen*

"He was an outstanding Prime Minister of Malaysia. During his premiership of over 20 years, he changed Malaysia from an agricultural, placid society into an industrial, dynamic society. He educated his people, sent many abroad on scholarships. They in turn transformed Malaysia."

*Lee Kuan Yew,
Prime Minister of Singapore, 1959–90*

"When Tun Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister of Malaysia in the early 1980s, I was a Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. The country and civil service in particular were initially impressed by his quiet charisma and his strong leadership and decisive qualities. He inspired us with many of his innovative policies like

the Look East Policy, Malaysia Incorporated, Buy British Last, and so on. Many of us were also moved by his nationalistic stance in international fora over economic, trade, investment, financial, diplomatic, security, and environmental policies. On the domestic front, great strides were taken to stimulate economic growth and strengthen the national infrastructure in the country. We were struck by the new modern highways, the new airport, the world-class Twin Towers, and the new national capital called Putrajaya. Many believed that Dr Mahathir really put Malaysia on the global map, and we were proud of it!

However, as he continued his long rule of 22 years, we slowly began to feel uneasy with the price we were paying for his authoritarian style of government. His overly critical and aggressive approach to the Western world, which provided us with export markets and foreign direct investment, lost us some international goodwill. In championing the legitimate concerns of South and Middle East countries, forcefully and sometimes even abrasively, he created considerable negative reactions against Malaysia that did not help. Internally the strong national institutions that we had inherited from the British at the time of Independence in 1957 began to weaken under Dr Mahathir's watch. The judiciary in particular, the civil service, the police and the education system, inter alia, gradually declined. Indeed the whole administrative system began to sag under the burden of growing corruption and money politics. Furthermore, his undue commitment to restructuring equity ownership for the *bumiputras* caused some

loss in efficiency, integrity and meritocracy, and competitiveness in the whole socio-economic system of the country. To a large extent the abuses that occurred during his stewardship, due to the improper implementation of many aspects of the New Economic Policy, increased racial and religious polarization and made Malaysia lose some of its shine and image as a successful multireligious and multiracial country. Tun Dr Mahathir's legacy would be much more creditable if his many achievements in the international arena and in developing our domestic infrastructure could have been enhanced by his building up strong institutions, rather than weakening them. If he had done so, Malaysia would be a much better, more united, and more progressive country, and a real example of a successful multiracial-religious country."

*Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam,
former Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Finance, Malaysia*

"Citizen Mahathir is an enigma and iconoclast. In my view, he has in retirement become a deeply mischievous and superbly entertaining egoist. It is the brute power of his ego that had driven him onwards and upwards. The word 'ego' holds no shame or fear for him. From a modest and compassionate medicine man (some of his close friends call him Bomoh) with a thriving medical practice in Kedah, he rose to become the most powerful Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years, breaking all social and other barriers. He evokes affection and admiration and also condemnation and scorn

from Malaysians. Even in the autumn of his years, he continues to badger and pique the new generations of leaders, an act he would not have tolerated when he held power. I admired him as an intellectual, a professional manager, and businessman. But his politics were perplexing to me. He was to me and men and women of my generation, the first among equals, who held the promise of a new dawn for Malaysia. When he became Prime Minister in 1981, most of us were excited with his leadership by example and the idea of a clean, efficient and trustworthy government. It was amazing that Mahathir had become in one brief moment in time a liberal democrat. Things began to change mid-stream when he launched a massive crackdown on his political enemies and dissidents in 1987 and created a new UMNO [leading political party] which he could control absolutely. As political supremo, he went on to emasculate all institutions of governance, especially the judiciary and the civil service. He amended the constitution, created an all-powerful Executive Branch, and destroyed the system of checks and balances. A nascent Malaysian democracy was replaced by an authoritarian leader who ran the country his way.

Even his bitter critics would, however, not deny that Mahathir was a man of action who was unafraid to do what he thought was in the interest of his country. He was a risk-taker and a man who would not allow opposition to stall his agenda as embodied in his Vision 2020. He transformed the economy from an agricultural backwater into a modern manufacturing and industrial metropolis, but he also deformed the Malaysian polity. That is a tragedy, and

Malaysia is today in a moral crisis of sorts. Citizen Mahathir is not the man I once knew and admired. Power, absolute power changed him. In fact, I see him as a tragic figure who is unable to let go. What is worse is that he has regressed to become the Malay ultra that he once was in the 1960s. Let us hope history will be kinder to him when future generations of scholars and researchers examine his record as our longest serving Prime Minister.”

*Din Merican, former Malaysian diplomat,
businessman, central banker and academic*

“For a long time, Dr Mahathir seemed the only Muslim leader in the world with an information age vision of the future instead of an obsession with the past. Moreover, he had done much for his country, raising his people from poverty and widening the middle class, while preventing inter-ethnic conflict like the anti-Chinese pogroms that have bloodied other Asian streets over the years. Regrettably, Dr Mahathir’s vision seemed to lose credibility with the Anwar Ibrahim affair. Instead of a sound strategy to compete in the global information age, Dr Mahathir seemed to have adopted the tactics of a police state with the arrest and ill-treatment of Anwar, his second in command while prime minister. Unfortunately, that terrible episode threatens to destroy the historic legacy of the many positive achievements Dr Mahathir brought to his country.”

*Alvin and Heidi Toffler,
authors of Future Shock, The Third Wave and many others*

Thanking those who helped make this book possible

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the subject of this second volume in the “Giants of Asia” series, was continually pleasant and cooperative in our four sessions of conversations, and seemed to want to help me make this book as real and helpful as possible. He will not of course remotely agree with all the judgments in this volume but I hope he accepts that everything in this work aims to be fair and honest.

Chris Newson, the imaginative and energetically hands-on general manager of Marshall Cavendish Asia, is one determined man—and a great pleasure to work with. His super editors **Violet Phoon** and **Lee Mei Lin** are so sharp—as good as any in the book business anywhere, in my experience. They bring balance, integrity, caring and solid judgment to difficult and important material. I would be lost without them and I am looking forward to working with them on the next GIANT.

My (Mimi) Lu, now a recently-credentialed U.S. Foreign Service Officer and recent graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, via UCLA, where she was the teaching-

assistant in my classes, was the chief researcher on this book, as she was on its predecessor; and she has been my right-hand almost-everything these past half dozen years. Thanks, as well, to **Theron Raines**, of Raines & Raines, who has been a most patient literary agent.

Reading an earlier draft were true friends and colleagues: **Nathan Gardels**, the preeminent U.S. international journalist, media entrepreneur (Global Viewpoints, New Perspectives Quarterly) and intellectually elegant internationalist; and **Mark Kleiman**, the outstanding drug-policy analyst (author of the thoroughly brilliant *When Brute Force Fails*, Princeton University Press, 2009) and a truly exceptional UCLA public-affairs professor. Both made superb suggestions and I did my best to integrate them but of course the views and conclusions are entirely my own responsibility.

Last and anything but least, **Andrea Darvi Plate**, who helped me sort out the difficult issue of Mahathir and the Jews, while suffering through my long periods of self-absorption: somehow, against all odds, she is still my glorious wife.

To

*The professors of my youth, at Amherst College and
Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, without whose
challenge and encouragement to think deeply and write carefully no
book of even the slightest possible value would ever have been written.*

*Especially and including:
the late Benjamin DeMott*

*Richard Falk
the late Roy Health*

*George Kateb
the late Earl Latham*

*the late C. Scott Porter
William Harrison Pritchard
the late Theodore Sorensen*

Richard Ullman

Thank you all: I would be nowhere without you.

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Dr Mahathir and the author at the former prime minister's office in Petronas Tower 1 (September 2009)

Prelude: How ‘Dr No’ Became ‘Dr Yes’

The beginning of four conversations,
in Kuala Lumpur or Putrajaya, with the former
Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981–2003)

LOVE him or hate him, support him or fight him, worship him or damn him, he was a giant of Asia.

For 22 years, he helped raise Malaysia out of an equatorial lassitude of nothingness and push it up onto the world stage as a player everyone in the global-know recognized.

At home, he helped make sure his beloved country didn't miss the forward thrust of the rollicking freight train known as the Asian Economic Miracle. Between 1981 and 2003—his years as prime minister—the Gross National Product of this otherwise obscure Southeast Asian and largely Muslim nation more than quadrupled. In some years the annual growth rate flirted with 10 percent, almost unheard of for the land of the mellow Malays.

But Dr Mahathir Mohamad was no one-dimensional man. At times he would move as silently as a river around rocks, slipping far downstream before anyone realized just how far he had gone. At other times he was an egg smasher who'd crack open clusters of

political opposition and fry them into pitiless, helpless omelets—a monster-sized personality, at times a stalker at center stage whom no one could ignore.

Just as Lee Kuan Yew for more than three decades was the omnipresent public face of Singapore, Dr Mahathir was the maestro of modernizing Malaysia for more than two.

Lee was the pragmatic conceptualist, drawing on his classical Cambridge education while behaving almost as if a stern, logical positivist who'd miraculously gotten a little country to prove or disprove his economic-development and governance ideas.

Mahathir was more of the folksy country doctor (which once in fact he had been), toting around his doctor's bag stuffed with quick fixes, experimental elixirs and just about anything that might quell political fever, restore the body politic to vigorous economic health and/or entice the patient to ask him to remain his or her doc for life.

It helped the framing of the dominant political personality of the first book in this “Giants of Asia” series, *Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew*, to draw on the legendary analogy of the late Sir Isaiah Berlin. His 1953 essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox” divided great men/women into two categories, based on the insight of the ancient Greek poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

In my book on the founder of modern Singapore, I put Lee Kuan Yew into the hedgehog category, even though he stoutly resisted most of the way, claiming he was a pragmatic fox who

abhorred grand conceptualizations (out of a very understandable generic fear of political ideologies).

But categorizing Dr Mahathir requires no comparable intellectual struggle: the man is an Isaiah Berlin fox, a political survivor and national leader of a million little different moves and tricks ... for 22 years, in effect, the conjuring magician of Malaysia.

So let's meet him.

Walking in, I re-introduce myself.

From behind the desk, in an olive-green safari-style jacket, the former political master of Malaysia (himself well-known for baiting Western journalists) could scarcely restrain himself. He looked at me almost as if he didn't recognize me.

And maybe he didn't, for it was ten years ago that we had met in New York at a World Economic Forum confab, and before that in Davos.

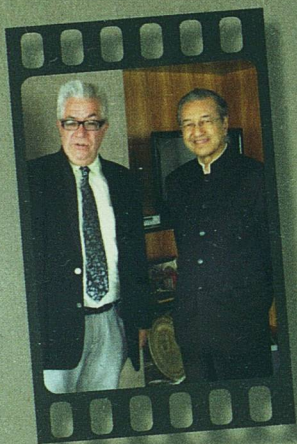
So I say: "You know me—the career American journalist."

Not two blinks go by and he quips: "That's too bad ... but no one is perfect!"

Vintage Mahathir.

A part of me secretly agreed with his dour view of my semi-disreputable profession, and I think he knew it, which is partly why he said it.

Then, in an almost pretentious preamble, I say, rather carefully and speaking slowly (though his English is first-rate, his hearing good and his mind, as you will see, still sharp in its mid-eighties):




“So, I adhere to that teaching—become a Muslim fundamentalist, and Muslim fundamentalism must let me be moderate.”

Dr Mahathir Mohamad began his professional career as a family physician but wound up prescribing innovative political medicines for the entire nation that remain controversial even today. Was he exactly the bold and fearless policy doctor that the troubled body politic of Malaysia needed? Or was he just another mendacious mediocrity with a record of persistent misdiagnoses, phony remedies and self-serving justifications? Only history's judgment can offer the final verdict ... but Mahathir himself is in no doubt.

In a riveting series of unprecedented conversations, Malaysia's most famous prime minister reveals to American journalist and author Tom Plate a panoramic panoply of views on governing, on Islam, on Jews, on the West and on Malays that are striking in historical sweep and contemporary relevance.

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