

MANAGING MALAYSIA AS TUN MAHATHIR



DR. AHMAD ZAHARUDDIN SANI AHMAD SABRI



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Managing Malaysia as Tun Mahathir

By

Dr Ahmad Zaharuddin Sani Sabri



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Contact:

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penerbitan@thebibliopress.com

thebibliopress.com

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📷 @bibliopress

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INTRODUCTION

TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD is a name that needs no introduction in this loving country. The former Malaysian Prime Minister, for 22 years plus 22 months, has had a distinguished career as the unshakable statesman, one etched in Malaysia's turbulent past.

The 96-year-old medical doctor, dubbed the Father of Modernisation in Malaysia, charted political stability for the country during his reign. Malaysia prospered economically under his leadership after overseeing the country's transition from an agrarian state to an industrialised and technology-based nation.

His charismatic leadership and competent administration have also earned him a respectable position among developed nations, while remaining a controversial figure who freely expresses his views.

The first Tun Dr Mahathir era (1981-2003) was also a period of strongman authoritarianism throughout the rest of Southeast Asia, most notably in the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986), Indonesia under President Suharto (1968-1998), and Singapore under Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1959-1990).

Massive demonstrations brought down Marcos and Suharto; while Lee stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990, he was named Senior Minister (1990-2004) and Minister Mentor (2004-2011) in Singapore's subsequent administrations.

Of this group of authoritarian presidents, Tun Dr Mahathir is the only one who departed voluntarily, neither resulting from nor initiating a regime change, and without continuing to have an official role in the government. This is not to say that Tun Dr Mahathir kept mute in his retirement.

No doubt Tun Dr Mahathir has transformed Malaysia into a world-class nation—the country is now considered as “a ray of hope in a troubled and distracted world.”

With his pragmatic and often materialistic policies, some of which were questioned by his adversaries and others within his own party, Tun Dr Mahathir was able to make Malaysia one of the most developed countries in the developing world.

Despite resistance from his right-hand man Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, Tun Dr Mahathir has led the country out of a financial catastrophe over his long 22-year presidency.



In 1982, Tun Dr Mahathir personally chose Anwar from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), a loud Islamic non-governmental organisation, to join UMNO. Anwar's choice to join UMNO stunned the country's political landscape at the time, since everyone else, particularly his fans, expected him to join PAS, the ruling party's arch-rival.

“I chose UMNO because it gives me the platform to continue my struggle, and I give my utmost support to the Prime Minister and the party he is heading.”

— ANWAR DURING HIS PRESS CONFERENCE, ANNOUNCING THAT HE HAS JOINED UMNO ON 28 MAR 1982. (UTUSAN MALAYSIA)

But Tun Dr Mahathir saw something that others did not. He recognised Anwar as a wonderful orator with enormous charisma, who embodies the Islamic values he seeks in his governments, which are moderate and progressive. It was a spiritual calling for Tun Dr Mahathir to convert Malaysia into a progressive nation that embraced Islam and modernization.

As history has shown, Anwar's development in the Malaysian political arena was blocked, despite the fact that he was seen as Tun Dr Mahathir's blue-eyed protégé, groomed to be his successor. What looked to be a financial problem turned out to be a relational catastrophe for both Tun Dr Mahathir and Anwar, when Anwar was fired as Deputy Prime Minister and from UMNO. He was finally charged with several sodomy and corruption charges, both of which he was later found guilty.



Following his arrest, Tun Dr Mahathir strengthened his position and stabilised the country's financial crisis by pegging the Ringgit to the US Dollar, and he remained Prime Minister for a few years before turning over to his protégé and Mr. Clean of Malaysia politics, Tun Abdullah Badawi, in 2003.

Mr. Clean, being Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister, represents Tun Dr Mahathir's ambition to see the nation governed by current Islamic principles while maintaining its nationalist character, with UMNO as the leading party for the multicultural nation. Pak Lah, as he is fondly known among Malaysians, had a memorable five-year reign as the nation's fifth prime minister.

Tun Dr Mahathir, on the other hand, did not appear to enjoy the Pak Lah style of leadership—particularly after a series of explicit attacks.

Malaysians are well aware of Tun Dr Mahathir's attacks on Pak Lah during the latter's tenure as Prime Minister. Pak Lah was never a Tun Dr Mahathir supporter in the first place. When Tun Dr Mahathir initiated his assaults shortly after fractures appeared in their relationship in late 2005, he did not mince his words. When Tun Dr Mahathir's tirades got caustic, many people felt very uncomfortable for both men.

Pak Lah, to his credit, maintained an exquisite quietude, never retaliating against Tun Dr Mahathir while he was still Prime Minister.

Najib is another protégé who has become an arch-

adversary for Tun Dr Mahathir, with the mother of all problems, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) fiasco, being the focal point of his decisive return to politics after 15 years of retirement.

The nonagenarian has had enough of seeing his nation become a laughing stock. With significant theft and the RM2.6 billion that made its way into Najib's personal account, Tun Dr Mahathir and his erstwhile deputy-turned-foe-turned-ally Anwar created the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition alliance to depose Najib in the 14th General Election (GE14).

On the eve of May 10, 2018, Malaysians watched the unthinkable: the great Barisan Nasional, which had dominated the nation for 61 years, was decimated when the election was won by Pakatan Harapan, led by Tun Dr Mahathir. For the first time, the opposition was unified, when all coalition parties decided to utilise the Keadilan (PKR, the political party led by Anwar Ibrahim) flag as the opposition alliance's single emblem.

The general election resulted in the country being headed for the first time by a 93-year-old man—and the first woman, Datuk Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, becoming the country's first female Deputy Prime Minister. The Pakatan Harapan coalition emerged victorious.

The success of Pakatan Harapan also provided Tun Dr Mahathir with a second chance to atone for his actions as Prime Minister from 15 years ago, and to accomplish



his vision of building Malaysia as a Muslim nation with progressive and contemporary values.

This book examines and analyses Tun Dr Mahathir's leadership style during his 22 years-and-22 months-reign as Prime Minister of Malaysia. All of this is based on my personal observations and research, as someone taught to be critical by Tun Dr Mahathir himself.

TUN DR MAHATHIR: WHEN IS IT TOO LATE TO BE A WORLD LEADER?

EX-MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTER Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stated four years ago, at the late age of 92, that he would run in the Malaysian general elections: this time as the leader of the opposition. If he succeeds, he might become Malaysia's next Prime Minister.

What a remarkable achievement.

Tun Dr Mahathir, credited with transforming Malaysia into a major commercial and economic power in Southeast Asia, left politics in 2003. He served as Malaysia's Prime Minister and helped the country grow into one of the world's largest trade nations— ranking 19th. While the chances are stacked against him, the wily old fox cannot be ruled out.

Tun Dr Mahathir stated in January 2018 that standing for election was “a task I have to perform.” His choice to run reflected the status of Malaysian politics, particularly that of



erstwhile ally Najib Razak, who is accused of a multibillion-dollar financial scandal involving a state development fund.

Despite a major redrawing of electorate boundaries and extensive media attention favouring the incumbent, Tun Dr Mahathir upset Malaysia's ruling coalition of more than six decades. Tun Dr Mahathir's triumph is the first time a Malaysian prime minister has been elected who is not a member of the UMNO party or the BN coalition, of which UMNO is the most powerful component.

He already surpassed Nelson Mandela as the world's oldest leader. He's worked at the job for 37 years, and he's been retired for 15 years.

His age puts him over three decades ahead of Mr. Najib, 21 years ahead of US President Donald Trump, and twice as old as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

How old is too old when it comes to being a world leader?

Politicians have always struggled with the problem of age. When Ronald Reagan stood for president of the United States in 1980, he was 69 years old and faced several doubts about his mental ability. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease five years after his presidency ended. Doctors and historians are still debating whether he was afflicted by the illness while in office.

When hereditary monarchs and autocratic leaders are included, it becomes clear that being the world's oldest



leader is a competitive distinction. Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, at the age of 91, holds the title of world's oldest leader, a title she inherited from Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, who was deposed from power last year at the age of 93. Meanwhile, Tunisia's 91-year-old president, Beji Caid Essebsi, is the world's oldest elected leader.

Tun Dr Mahathir, for one, is adamant that he still has time. "Of course, I'm a senior citizen," he stated in an April 2018 interview with the Associated Press, "—however, I'm still functional."

In that regard, he is correct. Tun Dr Mahathir has had two cardiac bypass surgeries, although he still has a rather full head of hair. With his commanding presence, penchant for political brawling, and taste for jokes, he might easily be mistaken for a 20-year-old. Yet he's never been shy about his age.

On the other hand, in recent years, the globe has seen a boom of younger leaders. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, is 39 years old, while North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is 34. Sebastian Kurz, the world's youngest leader, was elected chancellor of Austria last year at the age of 31, a little over one-third the age of Tun Dr Mahathir.

Tun Dr Mahathir, for my part, is no Ronald Reagan, who was famous for his occasional forgetfulness and alleged fondness of naps. Reagan's advisers meticulously moulded his public image to make him look younger, with dozens of photographs of him cutting wood and riding horses.



Tun Dr Mahathir does not require such assistance, since he behaves and seems youthful, or at least much younger than he is. Tun Dr Mahathir, however, appears to be immune to the mental and physical frailties that plague many persons in their seventies.

It's possible that part of it is due to personal discipline. Before becoming a politician, Tun Dr Mahathir was a doctor, and he routinely recites his principles for staying youthful, which include not eating too much, exercising regularly, and reading.

No one, in my opinion, is too old to be Prime Minister, but the position is demanding. In campaign videos, Tun Dr Mahathir emphasised his age, which appealed to voters' emotions. In one video, he told a little child, "I am already elderly," with tears in his eyes. "I don't have much time left. I'm required to contribute to the rebuilding of our nation, maybe as a result of mistakes I've done in the past."

There are moments in life when you must make difficult judgments, in my opinion. There is no such thing as a flawless decision, and it would be naïve to believe that everyone comes with a cast-iron guarantee. What matters most is that you gave it your all. Tun Dr Mahathir feels the same way.

I am certain that the administration led by Tun Dr Mahathir would once again lead Malaysia in the correct direction, towards becoming a high-income country by increasing the economy and establishing an environment



favourable to business growth.

Tun Dr Mahathir is not too elderly to be our leader again, and I believe Malaysians will wait patiently.



MALAYSIA NEEDS A MULTICULTURAL LEADER

INTER-ETHNIC PEACE IS CONSIDERED both a societal benefit and a government impediment in Malaysia, a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country. Because of the numerous distinct needs, beliefs, and goals of various communities within a multicultural society, a diverse community with variances in culture, language, and religion is sometimes considered as difficult to regulate.

Malaysia's society is renowned for its inter-ethnic harmony and stability, which has helped the nation flourish economically. While there are no violent clashes between ethnic groups, there are nonetheless ethnic disparities along political, economic, and geographic lines, making national unity difficult to achieve.

Tun Dr Mahathir believes in ethnic relations. If it is to be positive, it must be viewed within a particular historical

context, as well as the relevant socio-cultural, economic and political setting. As such, answers to questions regarding Malaysian ethnic relations must, of necessity, be peculiarly Malaysian.

In any community, whether homogenous or not, inequality has to be corrected. Even in the most conservative society, disparity is not completely tolerated. But, supposing the rich are not only rich but belong to a different and unassimilable race in a society, and the poor to be made up of another race in that same society, would only invite further racial antagonism to the economic disparity.

This is an explosive mixture—no responsible government would allow this to remain uncorrected.

In religious terminology, the themes of “solidarity,” “inclusion,” and “diversity” can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Although religions emphasise unity and dignity, they frequently confront challenges of diversity. When read correctly, unity does not imply uniformity, and so does not inspire domination.

There is also unity in variety when there is unity in diversity. Malaysia is a country where people of all religions, ethnicities, cultures, and traditions coexist peacefully.

The concept of a plural society refers to a society divided by disparities that exist in terms of race and ethnicity, which correspond to economic differences, resulting in tensions and instability.

Malaysia's ethnic variety is influenced by religious diversity, linguistic variances, economic specialisation, residential design, and political orientation, among others. People socialise with one another in Malaysia, but they do not share each other's religion, culture, language, ideas, or way of life. According to Tun Dr Mahathir, they met as persons solely on the market when buying and selling.

It is obvious that we are not going to achieve full unity, nor can we remove ethnic conflict completely. Any course that we set for ourselves will result in unhappiness for someone or others. So, since we cannot make everyone happy and satisfied, nor can we favour just one of the groups, the only choice left to us is to make everyone equally unhappy. Thus, no one group is favoured in Malaysia. Even the indigenous people are not getting all that they ask for, and are consequently just as unhappy and dissatisfied as are the non-indigenous.

(JANUARY 12TH 1983)

Religious variety is a natural truth that all creatures of God must accept, and it is an integral part of Malaysian culture. Yet religion, without a question, continues to play a role in the straining of inter-ethnic relations. As a result, religion remains a highly sensitive aspect in Malaysians' life.

The Islamic state, hudud legislation, the call to prayer, the use of Allah's name in the Malay-language Bible, halal food and business premises, and the seizing of bodily converts, among other issues, have a lasting influence on the non-

Malay community's outlook in Malaysia. Malaysian history reveals the political and economic causes that underpin the struggle in Malaysian society to be between Malays and non-Malays.

Whatever variables that lead to conflict, they nonetheless demonstrate that religion has become a very significant topic for discussion in the last 60 years. Time and again, faith has emerged as a major factor in racial unification, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia.

The religious sensitivity that has arisen in today's society is of considerable concern to people of all races, because conflicts or concerns involving the sanctity of religion, particularly Islam, might generate divisions amongst them.

Malaysia's official religion is Islam, according to Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution. Other religions, on the other hand, are permitted to pursue their individual religions' precepts in peace and cooperation.

Furthermore, Article 11 provides that each person is allowed to profess and follow their own faith. While conflicts between members of different religions should not emerge, according to items 3 and 11, the difficulties raised by Muslims and non-Muslims alike do cause inter-religious disputes to arise in Malaysia's multiracial society.

As a result, the administration has prioritised national unity and inter-racial ties in order to maintain political stability. Consequently, Malaysia has become a one-of-a-kind country in need of a leader to steer it in the right direction.



Managing a nation is the highest form of achievement that any leader can possess. Tun Dr. Mahathir who has vast experience and calibre of managing Malaysia for twenty-three years as Prime Minister over two terms certainly is one-of-a-kind world leader.

What are the challenges and hardship managing Malaysia over the years? In this book, Dr. Zaharuddin has diligently put forth interesting insights on how Tun Dr. Mahathir has become one of the most respected leader while bringing the world's attention to Malaysia.



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