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Defanged Mahathir will not be easily forgotten



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AND so, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will spend the rest of his days writing about Malaysia's history. It will be interesting to see how he chronicles his own contributions.

Until a while ago, the literary-minded assessing the career of Dr Mahathir would probably have captioned the profile "Autumn of the Patriarch". After all, he is indeed the father of modern Malaysia. So it's a pity that after Malaysian voters decisively turned cold towards him last weekend, "Lion in Winter" is probably the more apt headline.

That a person who left such a huge imprint on Malaysia and the wider region should be handed such ignominy so late in the day is a tragedy, even if you think that the 97-year-old veteran brought it upon himself. Pakatan Harapan, the political formation he helped to sire, is now at the forefront – even as he is out of Pakatan and the group is led by his one-time arch-nemesis, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The young, who voted in ever greater numbers this time around, can be unsparing of age.

How will wider Asia look upon this quixotic personality when the broader region's history is written? A bit more kindly, perhaps, as Malaysia heads towards a future where even mainstream Malay-based parties are tempted to take an ultra-nationalist and conservative approach to religion in politics, as we saw during this election.

If the religious sentiments whipped up turn out to be more lasting than short-term tactics deployed during a hotly contested election, global investors will take note. An unsettled political situation could mean capital flight, more so since alternative investment destinations such as Vietnam and India are swiftly rising. On the other hand, the markets will cheer a centrist government.

If the leading political figures do not act with sagacity, Dr Mahathir could yet end up writing: I told you so.

A leader of South-East Asia

Irascible and outspoken, barbed and deadpan in turn, Dr Mahathir will always be mentioned alongside Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Indonesia's Suharto as among the stalwarts who gave voice to their nations and South-East Asia through a critical period of history.

Malaysia was a largely commodities-based economy when Dr Mahathir took charge in July 1981. More than two decades later, as he ended his long first innings, per capita GDP had quadrupled and the nation was firmly placed on the global manufacturing supply chain, producing everything from machine parts to semiconductors. It even had a car industry. Today, Intel and Bosch are among multinationals that have announced plans for new semiconductor facilities in Malaysia. The economy is likely to achieve its transition from an upper-middle-income economy to a high-income economy by 2024,

Defanged Mahathir will not be easily forgotten

The father of modern Malaysia brought a pugnacious voice to the region and helped promote the moderate face of Islam.



Lion in winter: How will Dr Mahathir paint his long history in Malaysian politics when he writes his eagerly awaited memoirs? – AZHAR MAHFUF/The Star

according to the World Bank.

While complaints of crony capitalism dogged his rule, people seemed to accept this as part of a sort of unspoken bargain. Dr Mahathir allowed to unleash a flood of capital that helped turn the nation into a middle-income economy, in part thanks to heavy investment in infrastructure.

His legacy includes Asia's best highway system, enjoyed by many Singaporeans and built long before "connectivity" became a buzzword. The glittering Petronas Twin Towers that rejuvenated a whole downtown district was his doing as well, as was Putrajaya, the seat of government. Planning for Kuala Lumpur International Airport started during his time, while the spectacular Penang Bridge was completed. Telekom Malaysia and Tenaga Nasional were privatised.

He was less successful with Cyberjaya, a city at the heart of his Multimedia Super Corridor in Selangor meant to seed a Malaysian Silicon Valley, evidence that it takes more than land and capital to build a technology ecosystem.

On the other hand, the Mahathir-era tourism catchphrase, "Malaysia, Truly Asia", endures. The campaign was an instant success when it was

launched in 1999, boosting tourist arrivals. It would prove even more useful after the Sept 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, when Muslims around the world, uncertain about their welcome in the West, began picking Malaysia as a friendly destination.

Sparring on the world stage

But it was Dr Mahathir's verbal sparring on the world stage that would bring him the most attention.

Australia's then Prime Minister Paul Keating called him "recalcitrant" after he declined to attend the inaugural Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders' meeting in 1993, nearly triggering a trade war between the two countries. Billionaire hedge fund investor George Soros dubbed him a "menace to his own country" as Dr Mahathir walled in the ringgit in September 1998, during the Asian financial crisis, to protect his markets against speculators and ratings downgrades.

Dr Mahathir delivered some return punches in inimitable style.

In the heat of public sparring, he said Soros was a "moron". The ratings companies tended to be "moody, and their standards are

poor". As for the Australians, he dismissed them as America's "deputy sheriff" in the region.

Dr Mahathir probably felt vindicated on some counts. In the wake of 2021's surprise announcement of the Aukus treaty between Australia, the UK and the US, it would appear – at least to China – that he had correctly assessed that in a crunch involving an Asian nation against its Western allies, Australia would go with the West.

The move to wall in the Malaysian financial markets in 1998 stood against the orthodoxy of the International Monetary Fund and the stated position of his own deputy prime minister and finance minister, Anwar, who was soon thrown into jail on sodomy charges.

It must pain Dr Mahathir no end that today, Anwar seems far more acceptable to Malaysians than he is.

To be sure, he did get much right on the external front. However, to call him a visionary on foreign matters would be stretching it. Nowhere was the misjudgement greater than on the issue of Myanmar.

Under Dr Mahathir's command, Malaysia led the charge to give the junta in Myanmar a semblance of legitimacy, and Myanmar gained Asean membership in 1997. Today, Malaysia is among the most vocal in pressuring the military rulers on issues such as the treatment of Rohingya Muslims, halting the military's war against the Myanmar people, and allowing international access to jailed democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Dr Mahathir also promoted the idea of an East Asian Economic Caucus – a caucus without Caucasians – to exclude "outsiders" that might seek to dominate over Asia in deliberations. This went nowhere, partly because Japan was reluctant to back an idea excluding the United States from the regional framework.

Dr Mahathir's enduring external initiative, though, is the Look East policy. Since he first talked about it, many global leaders have followed with similar announcements. Still, there were those who thought that the Look East policy was a clever device by Dr Mahathir to find a way around the damage he knew his majoritarian policies were causing Malaysia.

Having unapologetically favoured the bumiputra over Chinese and Indian Malaysians, Dr Mahathir found it necessary to draw attention

to the work ethic of the Chinese and the way they went about building businesses. Since it would have been fraught politically at home to praise the Chinese – today, Perikatan Nasional is in a similar predicament and hence reluctant to have a coalition that includes the DAP – he made it look as though it was a tilt towards Japan, which at the time was Asia's biggest economy.

Perhaps Dr Mahathir realised the folly of his bumiputra-first policies. Just as the Look East policy was a mitigating device, his call for a Bangsa Malaysia – a Malaysian clan – just before he left office for the first time was another. It was a startlingly inclusive concept from a leader who had stressed race-based differences as a tool to acquire and retain power. But Bangsa Malaysia soon fell by the wayside as one more Mahathir-era catchphrase that went nowhere.

Business and economy aside, Dr Mahathir's signal contribution to the world, though, was to project Islam as a progressive force. Those who diss him now might want to remember that.

He matched words with action: A devout Muslim, he nevertheless bottled up an Islamic sect, Al-Arqam, displaying what were thought to be radical tendencies. He showed his wife immense deference. The women in his Cabinet were assertive and confident – then Trade Minister (now Tan Sri) Rafidah Aziz once told off an ambassador from West Asia for suggesting Malaysian women should cover their heads. Together with Suharto in Indonesia, Dr Mahathir helped maintain Islam's face as a faith of peace.

"It is not for me to say whether I have succeeded or not. The people and history will judge and determine whether my service was good or bad," Dr Mahathir said in his last speech as Umno president at the party's general assembly in 2003.

Dr Mahathir has been blamed for plunging the country into political chaos in the first place after his resignation as prime minister in 2020 unravelled the Pakatan government. Still, as Malaysians grope towards an uncertain future, some may wonder whether it would have been better to leave a few of the old lion's claws intact. – The Straits Times/Asia News Network

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