

Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, *A Doctor in the House. The Memoirs of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad*, Kuala Lumpur: MPH Group Printing, 2011, xi, 843 pp., glossary, index. ISBN 978-967-5997-22-8 (hardcover).

Memoirs as a genre are interesting as they give the reader a unique insight into the lives of individuals, who might or might not have left an impact on the society in which they live. The former is the case with the memoirs of Mahathir Mohamad, who for 22 years served Malaysia as prime minister. Many articles and books have been written about Mahathir and his many encounters on both the domestic and international political scene. They have, however, generally taken an etic perspective, that is, an outsider perspective, when portraying the politician and/or the private person. Memoirs, on the other hand, provide the reader with an emic perspective, where the person who is writing the book writes about himself or herself in first person (sometimes aided by professional co-writers). As such, this book is true to the genre.

Reviewing a book that consists of 843 pages and 62 chapters is quite a challenge. This task is so much bigger, as the chapters are organized chronologically, beginning with his birth on 10 July 1925, continuing with his taking over as prime minister on 27 June 1981, and ending with him witnessing Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's swearing-in ceremony as his successor on 31 October 2003. In order not to get lost in the myriad of individual stories – such as Mahathir's constant worry about political Islam, the problems surrounding his former second in command, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, or his at times rather problematic international profile in both Asia and beyond – the reviewer has chosen to focus on a theme that runs through the entire book: the relationship between the three main ethnic groups, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, and the impact this has had on national cohesion.

The title of the book, *A Doctor in the House*, is very well chosen. Mahathir is a doctor by profession and by playing on this, Malaysia then becomes a patient in need of a doctor when he took over as prime minister. Mahathir is also a staunch Malay, who is very concerned about his fellow Malays. Here we are at the crux of the book. Besides accounting for his very detailed and fascinating life story and career, he more or less constantly focuses on the most enduring problem Malaysia has been dealing with ever since its inception, a problem that has its roots back in its colonial time. I am here referring to the relationship between the three main ethnic groups in the nation, Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Mahathir laments the fate of the Malays compared especially to the Chinese. From being the original rulers of the Malay territory, the Malays were forced to accept the British colonizers, who then introduced the Chinese as a kind of buffer between themselves and the Malay sultans. The Chinese grew from being the societal underdogs to become a strong economic force, marginalizing the Malays in the process. Mahathir's main political project throughout his career was thus to reverse this situation by restoring them to what he perceived as the previous glory of the Malays. This was to be done, according to his understanding, not at the expense of the Chinese or Indians, but by reinstalling the Malays in their rightful position in Malaysian society, lifting them out of a self-imposed perception of being poor, backward and not respected in their own country.

His biggest concern in this context was the mindset of the Malays. Not the one developed during the British era but rather the original indigenous mindset that was one of politeness, restraint and softness. These qualities, noble as they are, do not match the aggressiveness of the Chinese, who have been accustomed to fighting for their very existence due to their precarious social position. Thus, the Chinese have developed a mindset of entrepreneurship and robustness that has carried them forward to the present – according to Mahathir – dominant ethnic position in the Malaysian society, thus relegating the majority Malays to an inferior societal position, a position reinforced by the original Malay mindset. The Malays must therefore reinvent themselves to regain their rightful societal position. This was the main project that Mahathir, all through his political career, tried hard to promote, a project that made him a Malay chauvinist in the eyes of his opponents.

Remedies were introduced after the violent racial riots in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969, where Malays and Chinese fought each other in deadly encounters. One of the main themes of the New Economic Policy (NEP), initiated in 1971, was to narrow the socio-economic gap between the Malays and the two other ethnic groups. Under the NEP, the Industrial Act of 1975 required that non-Malay-owned companies allocate 30 per cent of their shares to ethnic Malays to engage them in business. This policy, called an affirmative action programme, was not confined only to the economic realm but also to the education sector, where a quota system for Malay students in government universities was imposed, thus providing them with better access to higher education compared to the other two ethnic groups. As a consequence, a massive, mainly Chinese-led brain- and capital-drain took place, the effects of which Malaysia is still suffering from.

To Mahathir's disappointment, the affirmative action programme did not deliver as expected. On the contrary! The protection and privileges bestowed on the Malays by the NEP weakened them further by lulling the next generation into complacency, thinking that the NEP's affirmative action would always be there for them to fall back upon. According to Mahathir, the Malays like the easy way out and thus failed to rise above the challenges. They stopped trying to adapt to changing circumstances but remained laid-back and compliant. This is perhaps the biggest failure during the entire Mahathir era. Its main ramification, the inter-ethnic stalemate, constitutes a kind of 'lid' on the further economic development of Malaysia, as some Chinese entrepreneurs have described it. The problem was inherited by the current prime minister, Najib Razak, who in 2009 stated that the level of ethnic Malay business ownership, as instituted in the affirmative action equity shareholding policy of the NEP instituted in 1971, appears to be stuck at about 19 per cent. He went on to say that it would be madness to continue the affirmative action policy, as it has failed to achieve its goals since its inception. The question is, however, whether it is possible for the current federal government, based as it is on the Malay-dominated UMNO party and its coalition partners, to implement such a major policy change due to the fact that it is in dire need of Malay votes if it wants to regain an absolute majority in parliament, a majority that it lost in the March 2008 national election.

This rather superficial account of Malaysia's current most important societal dilemma delineates nevertheless an undercurrent that runs throughout the entire book. The many small stories of both a personal and political nature that bind these memoirs together provide the reader with a fascinating insight into the most interesting period of Malaysian nation-building. Due to the book's emic orientation, the reader is not only provided with a personal account of Malaysia's political history, but also an insider perspective provided by none other than its main architect, Mahathir himself. This is what makes these memoirs truly unique. If readers take the biased presentation of Malaysia's political history into account, they will get inside knowledge behind the history that is very seldom provided. I can recommend this book for all of those who are interested in the political history, not only of Malaysia, but also of Southeast Asia as a whole.

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