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Malaysian Maverick: The man who will not be ignored

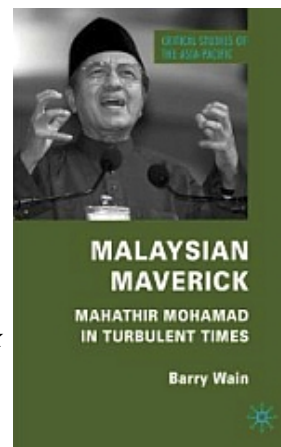
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With a title like *Malaysian Maverick*, the biography of former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, is sure to set tongues wagging. It has been grabbing attention, too. Written by Barry Wain, a former editor of the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, the book is an extensive, independent 368-page study of the man who ruled Malaysia between 1981 and 2003.

A journalist with nearly four decades of experiences and presently Writer-in-Residence at Singapore's *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, Wain told the audience of the *Foreign Correspondents Association's* talk at SMU that he took more than two years to put *Maverick* together.

Launched in Singapore last December and in Indonesia in January, the book was only recently approved by Malaysia's Home Ministry for distribution – after much controversy. Mahathir, himself, had even stepped in and asked for Wain's book to be approved for distribution as he does not require "protection" from some of the book's assertions.



Mahathir's rise

While known as the champion of the Malays, Mahathir is actually part Indian by descent – a fact that he has painstakingly downplayed and which most people acknowledged only silently and did not openly talk about. His grandfather was an Indian immigrant. Born in 1925 to a school teacher father, Mahathir, who was educated in the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore, rose from being a country doctor to become the first commoner to rule the country (the previous three Malaysian prime ministers all had royal bloodlines).

During his 22-year tenure – a period marked by a firm, centralised control of power, in keeping with his strong personality – Mahathir turned Malaysia into one of the developing world's most successful economies. While pressing the case of the Malays, he had also openly admonished the Malays for being lackadaisical and for having a "crutch mentality"; perhaps caused by an over-reliance on the government's affirmative action programme (launched by the country's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak in 1971). Known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), *bumiputras* (literally translated as *sons of the soil*), predominantly Malays, are to have 30% share of many sectors of the economy, on top of other perks, such as discounts on housing.

While he wanted to show that Islam was compatible with modernisation, that there is no conflict for the Malays to pursue wealth and try to do well economically, just like the ethnic Chinese, Mahathir was blamed for encouraging cronyism and patronage. When he retired, his aim of closing the gap between the Malays and the Chinese was only partly fulfilled.

Mahathir was also known for his firm (although some say fierce) stance on promoting Asian values in the face of Western assertiveness. Wain noted that it was clear from Mahathir's earlier writings that he didn't like certain trends that he saw as originating from the West – things like long hair on men, torn jeans and homosexuality.

Scandals, conspiracies, politics

For *Maverick*, Wain interviewed Mahathir on three separate occasions. He also spoke to Mahathir's wife, two of their children, and numerous others who have worked for, or had dealings with, Mahathir. Wain explained that he did not intend for the book to be a theoretical analysis of Mahathir's performance, but rather, a story told from the ground.

As a seasoned commentator of regional politics, Wain chose to focus on the significant events in Mahathir's life and its ripple effects. One incident highlighted was the wastage of public funds, amounting up to 100 billion ringgit (US\$31.2 billion). Another incident involved the judiciary, where, as the Prime Minister, Mahathir was believed by many to have stepped out of line when he interfered with the courts.

In 1988, Mohamed Salleh Abas, then Lord President of the Supreme Court, was dismissed – just when Salleh had scheduled an unprecedented hearing by a full bench of nine judges to decide the fate of Mahathir's political career. This made people suspect that Mahathir played an instrumental hand in the removal. The official reason given was that the Malaysian head of state then, King Mahmood Iskandar, was unhappy with a letter that Salleh had written to

him. Wain pointed out that, to this day, Mahathir still insists that it was not his, but the King's idea to sack Salleh.

Be that as it may, Wain detailed how the sacking of Salleh from the judiciary's top post might have been orchestrated by Mahathir: Why would the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (as the Malaysian king is known) go along with Mahathir's plan to sack Salleh? Perhaps the King did so because he owed Mahathir "an incalculable debt"? Wain wrote that the King, who had a record of violent conduct before assuming the throne, killed his caddy with a golf club in a fit of temper. Mahathir chose not to reveal this to anyone – a decision that later allowed him to request for Salleh's removal, thereby saving his own political career.

Malay identity

The first two chapters of the book are Wain's favourite parts, for its contents have not been widely discussed before. One is Mahathir's own ethnic ancestry – a sensitive issue that people were generally aware of, but did not talk about openly – because for someone of an Indian origin to become leader of the *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO), such talk might very well open a can of worms. Mahathir himself tried to downplay his own family background, only saying that he was from Kedah.

Wain revealed that in his interviews with Mahathir, the topic of ancestry came up. Indeed, his father's forebears had come from India. However, no records survived and his father had never mentioned it. His father never acknowledged any Indian relatives and spoke no Indian language, Mahathir said. Yet, one of his grandsons told Wain that he had once overheard Mahathir's father scolding a stranger with impeccable Tamil pronunciation.

That Mahathir did not discuss his Indian side publicly made the matter seem like it was a "dirty family secret". Wain said that a genealogical chart displayed in Mahathir's old house, which was converted into a museum in 1992, traced his lineage through his Malay mother, but had "almost nothing on his father's side". The fact that Mahathir was not 100% Malay was not the most critical issue around. Wain noted that previous premiers of Malaysia were also of mixed blood: Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first prime minister, for example, had a Thai mother.

Wain explained that in Malaysia, the concept of being Malay is not strictly an ethnic-based one. Under the Malaysian Constitution, a Malay is someone who professes Islam, speaks Bahasa Melayu and conforms to Malay customs or *adat*. Nevertheless, Wain noted that Mahathir was sore that even the Tunku sometimes referred to him as "that Pakistani" when he had rallied behind the Tunku even when the opposition party PAS called the Tunku "son of Siam". However, he became a lot more relaxed about his Indian ancestry upon retirement, Wain observed. The former premier and his wife even adopted two kids from Pakistan.

Patronage & Petronas

A talk about Mahathir would be incomplete without the mention of Petronas, Malaysia's national oil company with which he was closely associated. According to Wain, Petronas was "Mahathir's favourite piggy bank" in more ways than one. He had left it alone, by and large, to become one of the most successful corporations in Malaysia. However, during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, a transport company owned by Mahathir's son ran into financial difficulty. To save the company from a foreign takeover (Mahathir disliked the idea of foreigners owning Malaysian assets), he got the government to bailout the company, Wain said. "Petronas' money was used".

Even after stepping down from his official posts, Mahathir still keeps an office at the Petronas Towers – the most visible symbol of economic progress during his era – and he also maintains a regular vocal presence. Why is he not content to leave the scene? Mahathir just "doesn't like to be ignored... he wants the limelight," Wain said. Sometimes, that means getting rid of talented rivals, such as former deputy Prime Ministers Musa Hitam and Anwar Ibrahim, and former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

He did not want people who were too smart or independent-minded as they posed threats to his own position. Instead, those who were willing to play by Mahathir's rules in exchange for favours got to stay. "So the party became one of patronage," added Wain. Those who stayed were able to do so on Mahathir's terms. People joined UMNO to win contracts. Finally, his chosen successor was the relatively docile and mild Abdullah Badawi.

"Mahathir thought he could control Abdullah, but Abdullah had his own group of young people who were totally prepared to introduce changes and break away from Mahathir's legacy. Mahathir didn't like this."

Mahathir, Dr. M, Che Det

As the longest-serving Malaysian prime minister to date, Mahathir has certainly earned a rightful place for himself in the annals of this region's history. But what defines his legacy? "The judiciary is in a mess, though it is not totally corrupt," Wain said. He added that Mahathir's system of patronage led to "money politics", especially in UMNO. He also noted that other state institutions, for example, education and the police force, have not only become unprofessional, but also politicized at the top levels.


On UMNO cronyism, Wain said that the system of patronage has become so deeply entrenched that if current premier tried to reform it, the party would most certainly throw him out. "On the positive side, the physical


infrastructure is very good," noted Wain. "The growth of the middle class, including significant numbers of Malays – that's also an achievement."

Seven years after stepping down, Mahathir is still very much in the public eye. Not many 84-year-olds maintain regularly updated blogs, but through [Che Det \(http://chedet.co.cc/chedetblog/\)](http://chedet.co.cc/chedetblog/) (Mahathir's pen name at one time), he keeps a rather lively one with periodic comments such as calling 9/11 a staged incident – something that Wain suspects Mahathir does not truly believe. "He craves attention... so he said something very outrageous to be noted. It is a bit sad that he does that just to get attention."

With nearly 29 million visitors to his blog (and counting), Dr. M, as he is also known, continues to court controversies; a Malaysian maverick, in word and deed.

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