

BOOK REVIEWS

Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times.
By Barry Wain. Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan,
2009. Hardcover: 363pp.

It must be a sign of the utter official confusion over the facts of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's life and the fictions dogging his reputation that the sale of Barry Wain's book has been held over in Malaysia by the censors of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Considering that Mahathir's administration was (some would be surprised to know) the least intolerant of all Malaysian administrations towards books — but not the mass media — such petty and ultimately futile harassment would have been unlikely were he still Prime Minister.

That should not disconcert Wain, a former editor of the *Asian Wall St Journal* who wrote this book while he was Writer-in-Residence at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. The book covers a lot of ground, necessarily so given Mahathir's sixty odd years in public life and twenty-two-year premiership. During his political career there was "brutal politics", though not of the blood-spilling sorts, ranging from his expulsion from UMNO in 1969, to Anwar Ibrahim's imprisonment in 1998 and Abdullah Badawi's prodded retirement in 2009. During the "Mahathir era" (July 1981 to October 2003) financial scandals, "mega projects", failed privatization, and costly re-nationalization took place, symptoms of the "turbulent times" that marked Mahathir's ambitious economic management. A broad readership interested in Malaysian affairs will find *Malaysian Maverick* a handy and up-to-date store of information gleaned from three main sources: contemporaneous news reports, academic writings, and interviews with Mahathir and several people who knew him as an intimate, friend or foe. Judging by early online responses to a few of its revelations, the book might even serve

to agitate some, in particular younger, Malaysians whose political memory may go back no further than 1998–2000 when *Reformasi* denounced Mahathir as *Mahafiraun*, a tyrannical “Great Pharaoh”.

For all that, and its useful updates, Wain’s book confirms but does not significantly change what is known about Mahathir’s politics, including some of its most unsavoury portions. The book adds little in critical or politically “offensive” analysis that had not been written about Mahathir by Malaysia’s dissenting academics, online journalists and NGO activists in his time as Prime Minister. Perhaps this aspect of the book is intended. On the first page of his Foreword, Wain states that, “I do not analyse Dr Mahathir’s performance within a theoretical framework”, but to “tell [Mahathir’s] story from the ground level” and give a “fresh look” at “the interesting and significant events of his life and the impact they had on him and his country”. This reviewer, though, would dispute his claim to a fresh look from ground level if that implies something akin to the grassroots lenses of the present Malaysian Internet *hoi polloi*.

Wain’s perspective is rather that of the (surviving) English language regional and international media whose long relationship with Mahathir was never more intense than when he was Prime Minister. Mahathir and the media (the *Asian Wall St Journal*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek*, in particular) shamelessly used and baited each other, the one to get an international hearing, the other highly quotable copy. To be sure, the “Malaysia hands” among them — many of the finest ones being Wain’s colleagues — provided first-rate investigative reporting. However, the leader writers and publishers themselves were smug and condescending as Dow Jones-dominated titles invariably were when laying down the law for a Southeast Asian politician of uncertain attachment to a neoliberal regime of liberalization, deregulation and competitive privatization. Unable to hate Mahathir (who was no pariah opposed to Western investment or security interests), but unwilling to love him (since his petulant criticisms of their hypocrisies rarely “earned praise” from Western leaders), the media settled on dubbing him a maverick.

Really, was Mahathir a maverick? The term seemingly befits a man who indulged an image of himself as going *My Way* and known to sing that old Sinatra song in private settings. Wain reaffirms this media consensus on Mahathir: flexible in vision but obdurate in practice, pragmatic if authoritarian, Islamizing yet modernizing, pro-business and pro-cronies, pro-Western money but anti-Western values, and so on. In other words, the “uncrowned king”, as Wain inappositely calls Mahathir at one point, strengthened Malaysia’s “macroeconomic

muscles and sinews” but “emasculated all institutions”, making the country better known but rendering it more easily ridiculed.

On deeper reflection, one realizes — using Wain’s information but eschewing his perceptions — just how conventional Mahathir was. In developmental terms, he embodied a Third World impulse discomfiting only to the point that an upstart presses for a place in the sun, not to turn the world upside down, in the manner of avowed foes of the system. His views of cultural traits, ethnic differences and international competition were shaped by colonial stereotypes and social Darwinism. On economic matters, he drew eclectically from contending theories — modernization, structuralism, dependency and the East Asian “catch-up” model. Ironically, few things exposed his conventional core more obviously than his conduct in economic crises. When he faced recession in the mid-1980s, he turned to foreign direct investment for rescue. Save for his currency and capital controls, every solution — bailout, recapitalization and reflation — he tried during the East Asian financial crisis has been repeated on a far larger, not to say more irresponsible, scale in the present Western financial debacle. And, truly, what was his highest ambition if not to join the club of developed nations by diligent emulation of one or another model of success?

As it were, some of Mahathir’s most excoriated failings might have been learnt from others. In the 1997 stock market free fall, to take a notable instance, Mahathir changed the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange’s takeover rules to help Renong Berhad, UMNO’s ailing corporation. But, back in 1981, the London Stock Market had changed its acquisition rules after the Malaysian government’s purchases of controlling shares in old British plantation houses — “dawn raids” as the British media derided those purchases. In 1982, when tin short-sellers were caught by Maminco’s tin-hoarding — to punish speculators in Mahathir’s view — the London Metal Exchange “permitted short-sellers to pay a fine and avoid having to purchase tin from the mystery buyer at steep premiums”. Thus, the tin short-sellers were let off the hook, as Wain tersely notes, while Maminco was ruined. That is no reason to excuse Mahathir. Yet, although he devotes equal space to the “tin caper” and the East Asian financial crisis (as if the two wreaked comparable havoc), Wain does the reader a disservice by not asking if a “maverick” had learnt from the masters of the game that those who held power saw nothing sacrosanct about market rules.

Against that light, it should be less tempting to see Mahathir’s flaws and failures as flowing from an unbending will and ill-disciplined whims even if complex swings between anxiety and hubris have influenced his conduct. In politics as in economics, at

home and abroad, he often stumbled where his visions and ideas led him. Wain's recounting of the heavy industry and privatization failures, the UMNO split of 1987, and the US-led rebuff of his Asian regionalist initiatives attests to that. But Mahathir frequently won the day when it was opportunism and courage of conviction that over-rode all else, as evidenced by his humiliation of the judiciary, toppling of Anwar and gamble on capital controls.

All that poses a huge riddle: how much was Mahathir the master of situations and the manipulator of puppets; to what extent was he an instrument of social and political forces stronger than his own agency?

Wain does not address this riddle which no academic or journalist writing on Mahathir has been able to answer fully. But Wain's updated information provides some basis for tentative replies. On UMNO's connection to business, Wain overwhelmingly focuses his attention, backed by his interviews with them, on Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Daim Zainuddin, two former UMNO treasurers. Razaleigh and Daim strongly disputed each other's versions of their separate roles and culpabilities. Yet, neither implicated Mahathir, although consensus has it that the business-politics nexus grew under his patronage. Likewise, Mahathir planned to build a capitalist vanguard but his picked winners only formed a (multi-ethnic) oligarchy. In the end, Mahathir could no more control domestic cronies than he could foreign currency speculators. The former's state-subsidized profiteering undermined his grand aspiration of Korean-style industrialization; the latter's market-organized predations wrecked his Multimedia Super Corridor ideal of engagement with globalization.

Nor did matters end there. Wain's concluding comment on Mahathir's reappearance at the 2009 UMNO general assembly leaves the impression that the ovation Mahathir received signalled the maverick's return to the driver's seat. That would be mistaking form for substance. In 1998, by no one's leave, Mahathir mercilessly threw Anwar out of UMNO. In 2009, Mahathir merely, even desperately, lent his support to those who gradually edged Abdullah out of the party presidency. At successive assemblies after 2004, UMNO had rubbished Mahathir's Vision 2020, the ideological appeal of his powerful electoral coalition that won election after election. One outcome was UMNO's defeats in the general election of March 2008. The 2009 UMNO assembly delegates who applauded Mahathir did not even understand that they had so dismantled his legacy that he had become, as *Reformasi* dissidents mocked a decade earlier, irrelevant.