

*Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times, second edition.* By Barry Wain. Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 371 pp.

Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, is nothing if not assertive. Booted from his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), in 1969 for having goaded then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to resign in “the most notorious letter in Malaysian politics” (p. 24) and (in)famous for his subsequent rants both while in office after his rehabilitation in UMNO and after retirement, Mahathir has never been reticent. Not content with just a political platform, he has proceeded from a provocative column in the *Straits Times* as an undergraduate in the 1940s; to several books, including the highly influential *The Malay Dilemma* (1970) and, more recently, an autobiography of more than 800 pages; to a characteristically cantankerous blog (on which he posted his own review of the first edition of the book under consideration here). As Barry Wain described, acolytes have pushed the study of Mahathir’s thoughts, too, including at a purpose-built institute at the Universiti Utara Malaysia. Yet, overexposed as he might seem, Mahathir remains something of an enigma. With *Malaysian Maverick*, Barry Wain set out to clear away the cobwebs in which so much of Mahathir and his record are shrouded.

*Malaysian Maverick* is not an “academic” book. There is no theory of leadership guiding Wain’s analysis (or, it seems, Mahathir’s actions); institutional constraints are taken as a given rather than systematically explored; Mahathir is assumed *sui generis* rather than examined as an exemplar of some specific “type”. This is not interpretive political or intellectual biography of the sort essayed — with the same subject — by Khoo Boo Teik in his excellent 1995 *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*. Indeed, *Malaysian Maverick* may at times frustrate more scholarly readers in its preference for exhumation and description over deep or critical analysis. Yet the volume stands on its merits, as whodunit of political intrigue, as a paean to truly laudable accomplishments, and as an exposé of the inner workings

of a political machine. It is for those reasons that the book has been so widely read and hotly debated thus far, and that Wain issued a new edition.

Mahathir set his sights on politics early on, alongside an early career as a medical doctor. Labelled an “ultra” or “Malay chauvinist” for both his support of policies to promote Malays’ communal uplift and his vitriolic attacks on Chinese-majority Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party (especially during Singapore’s fraught, brief merger into Malaysia in the 1960s), Mahathir saw himself as an iconoclast, but not an extremist. What emerges through Wain’s very readable narrative is the remarkable extent to which Malaysian politics today — institutions, policies, norms, pathologies — is the product of Mahathir: his vision, his machinations, his lust for national glory.

As Wain explained in detail in his preface to this new edition, the first edition of *Malaysian Maverick* nearly failed to make it to Malaysia. While Mahathir himself did not call for a ban, he did threaten a libel suit, even as others clamoured for investigations into the corrupt practices disclosed in the book. The first edition was released globally in late 2009; it was only five months later, in April 2010, that *Malaysian Maverick* was cleared for sale in Malaysia — by which time untold numbers of Malaysians (including Mahathir himself) had procured copies in Singapore or elsewhere. Mahathir seems not to have revised his interpretation of events in his memory-based *A Doctor in the House: The Memoirs of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad* (2011) in light of what Wain wrote, the latter notes; Wain, on the other hand, wove references to Mahathir’s autobiography into the second edition of *Malaysian Maverick*, “to update the story and fully represent [Mahathir’s] point of view” (p. xxviii) — apparently the main change from the previous edition, although Wain did not specify the scope of his revisions. Otherwise, the text draws on several interviews with Mahathir and others with his children, colleagues, and observers; journalistic and academic accounts of events; and financial and other records.

The result is part straightforward biography, part historical narrative, part investigative journalism; it is as much the story of UMNO and of the *how* of Malaysian politics as the story of Mahathir — and what a disturbing story it is! Wain painted Mahathir as both a true idealist and a masterful political operator, driven not by personal cupidity (unlike most of the cronies whose rapacity he, rather inexplicably, furthered) so much as his yen to be in control, the grand master of Malaysia's political chess game. Resentful of his outsider status — as a commoner, as one educated locally, as part-Indian — Mahathir rose to the top purposefully, taking risks (like that letter to the Tunku), but consistently savvy and pragmatic. Indeed, the reader may be left to wonder what Mahathir's motive was, not in pushing Malaysia to develop, to the extent of sometimes foolhardy gambles, but in permitting or even fostering the now intractable penetration of “money politics” into his country's affairs. What was in it for him, especially given that (as Wain somewhat mockingly noted) Mahathir now loudly bewails the very vices and undemocratic features that marked his own regime? For instance, Wain offered provocative details on the major financial scandals of the Mahathir era, from currency speculation to steel manufacturing. Yet these are tied back to Mahathir the man only tenuously; the book waffles between being the story of Mahathir Mohamad and being the story of his “turbulent times”, leaving somewhat ambiguous the extent to which these narratives are one and the same.

Although Wain clearly aspired to a reasonably balanced account, at times, his language belies such neutrality. Sometimes intemperate (“Dr. Mahathir trashed the tradition...” [p. 60]; UMNO is “bereft of ideas” and concerned only with “maintaining its hold on power” [p. 310]) or breathless, he revelled, too, in the details of Mahathir's, his close associates' (e.g., Daim Zainuddin), and UMNO's transgressions. Moreover, that we lose sight of where Mahathir ends and Malaysia/the system begins complicates assessment or prognostication. Mahathir himself seems to be held responsible not only for all that happened under his watch, but also for all of the New

Economic Policy, launched in 1970, before Mahathir took the reins of state (albeit very much in line with Mahathir's diagnoses from the start). By the end, one wonders whether this system can ever be set to right; Wain's assessment was clearly that this is a party and polity out of joint.

At times, I wished for a more focused account: for the story of Mahathir himself, with fewer digressions. Because Wain was trying to do so much — to situate Mahathir discursively at the centre of all things Malaysia — the narrative sequence can be slippery, jumping around chronologically, as from Proton's saga of the 1980s–2000s back to the privatization policy introduced in 1983, or from Daim as fixture in Mahathir's inner sanctum back to his recruitment in 1984. The analysis, too, could aim for depth rather than breadth at times — we are left with some relatively specious claims (for instance, the impression that the ethnic gap in birth rates stems just from differential economic opportunities), and parts of the discussion are heavily reliant on a limited range of sources and scholars, with limited original analysis (for example, in the chapter on Islam).

Moreover, Wain ceded too much ground to the dilettante reader, who reads one chapter at random rather than tackling the book cover to cover; that accommodation makes for an awkward flow across chapters, with more repetition than necessary. The text could also be better copy-edited; I noted a couple of incorrect terms, an important name consistently misspelled, some formatting detritus likely from the prior edition. And the discussion of Anwar's trials — specifically, those decisions still pending as of “early 2009” — could use updating. Also, it was not obvious to me why Mahathir is always “Dr. Mahathir” here, when others — for instance, fellow physician Wan Azizah — are referred to *sans* professional titles.

These quibbles notwithstanding, Wain's *Malaysian Maverick* is well worth reading, both for Malaysians concerned with the past and future of their country's politics and for Malaysia-watchers. Wain's explorations offer a starting point for economists keen to calculate the long-term cost of corruption, and for political scientists desirous of knowing what makes certain political institutions subject

to such thorough personalization and co-optation. Although more descriptive than theoretical, the book lends itself well, too, to undergraduate or graduate courses on leadership, on “semi-democracy”, and on political-business cycles or “money politics”, as well as on Malaysian or Southeast Asian politics.

Meredith L. Weiss