

The nation-building strategy of Dr. Mohammed Mahathir

by Sophie Tanapura

The international press, forever sensitive to “human rights,” has once again declared open season on yet another developing sector leader, Dr. Mahathir Mohammed, prime minister of Malaysia. He is typically attacked in such publications as the Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review* for his supposed dictatorial suppression of democracy and corrupt dealings. Unlike Panama’s General Noriega, however, he has not yet been branded a “drug thug,” since under his government, Malaysia hangs drug pushers!

In his 1986 book, *The Challenge*, Mahathir admits that there is more to this press campaign than meets the eye. He writes, “Western mass media often accuse this government or that of deviating from democratic practice so that the world will look unfavorably on whatever government is their target. Various organizations, e.g., Amnesty International, are set up by the West to worsen the image of any government that does not conform to Western values.”

Unfortunately, very few people outside of Southeast Asia know anything at all about Mahathir, or Malaysia for that matter. While Khomeini and Qaddafi were being promoted as the leadership of the Islamic world, Malaysia, out of the limelight, was steadily developing its predominantly Muslim population, industries, and infrastructure.

Though Malaysia’s racial tensions have been greatly exaggerated, communal problems that do exist are a direct result of British colonial rule, which ended in 1957. Under the British, the Chinese were favored with civil service positions and business opportunities, while ethnic Malays were treated as third-class subjects, used primarily as uneducated, poorly paid laborers. After independence, the ruling UMNO (United Malays National Organization) sought to correct the discrepancies between Malay and especially Chinese living standards. Educational and economic incentives have been extended to Malays, with such opportunities increasing under Mahathir. Key as well has been the continuing development of Bahasa Malaysia

istration. Since the cultural matrix of ethnic Malays is Islamic, Mahathir used Islamic teachings to organize and upgrade

Malay Muslims. In *The Challenge*, he explains the coherent relationship between Islamic tradition and scientific and technological progress. Islam, he writes, does not prohibit but encourages the pursuit of all knowledge. In fact, not to do so represents a failure to appreciate God’s gifts. Furthermore, he warns that the idea that “worldly” knowledge is in conflict with Islam could only benefit the enemies of Islam, since a Muslim society weak in the knowledge necessary for its survival would surely be destroyed by its stronger adversaries.

Mahathir writes, “Those who remember Allah always and think about the creation of the heavens and the earth and do not waste God’s gifts will surely become not only strong in faith, but also knowledgeable about the world around them. In other words, they will become men of faith and education (or knowledge), and not just men of faith who do not understand God’s gifts and are devoid of knowledge.”

Likewise, Mahathir attacks the fundamentalists, who reject the modern world, in an effort to “revive” the archaic way of life of A.D. 600, the era of the Prophet Mohammed. Poverty does not mean spiritual strength, Mahathir writes, poverty destroys the well-being of a society which seeks to uphold spiritual values. Knowledge and wealth, when used to strengthen the society as a whole, can serve to strengthen the spiritual well-being of society. He ironically notes how the fundamentalists have served to factionalize the Islamic world and how their “spirituality” has not prevented their strident and false denunciations of their fellow Muslims.

Instructing Malay citizens on the importance not just of education, but also of striving to understand the laws of the universe, that is, “God’s gifts,” is especially significant given the British efforts, during colonial rule, to portray modern education as “Western” and “secular,” i.e., godless. Many Malays came to regard the colonial education system as an attempt to undermine their faith. As Mahathir points out, to this day a debate exists between secular and religious education. This brainwashing, moreover, has led to a serious shortage of ethnic Malay students pursuing scientific fields, a problem the government is committed to correcting.



Dr. Mahathir

In *The Challenge*, Mahathir also encourages Malays to take a deeper look at Western civilization in order to learn from its achievements. He writes, "An example already exists. The modernization of Japan during the Meiji period is an illustration of planned assimilation of foreign civilization. The assimilation of useful and good aspects of Western knowledge, ways, or systems can also be done in an organized and systematic manner today. For this, the East must decide for itself which aspects can be emulated and to what extent practiced. The East, with its background of a distinctive civilization and fundamental values respected by the world, is certainly capable of making a wise choice."

He continued, "Malaysia and the Malays are directly involved in the East-West [Orient-Occident] conflict. Whereas the non-Malays have easily adjusted to Western civilization, the Malays seem to be more attracted by the forms than the substance of that civilization. Thus, we find that though young men keep long hair, their acquisition of knowledge does not match their adherence to this fashion. The wild ways of the West are quickly assimilated, but not the values and norms which have given strength to the West."

Climbing the technology ladder

Mahathir's approach to economics strongly reflects the post-colonial tradition established by Malaysia's second prime minister and "Father of development," Tun Abdul Razak, who believed that development is "the greatest safeguard of our country's sovereignty." Crucial to the stability of the nation has been the fact that since its independence in 1957, it has had only four prime ministers. Under Malaysia's first

prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Razak held the crucial positions of deputy prime minister, minister of defense, minister of education, and minister of national and rural development. From this vantage point, he directed the nation's infrastructure development, from water and electrification to road building and education.

Mahathir himself, as trade and industry minister under the third prime minister, Onn, established the government-owned Heavy Industries Corporation (Hicom) as the spearhead for technology transfer and development of crucial industries. When he became prime minister in 1981, Mahathir transferred control of Hicom to the home ministry, which he also headed, in order to continue to direct Hicom's development.

Although Mahathir is not an advocate of state-owned industries, he saw the necessity to upgrade Malaysia's manufacturing technologies, and move away from reliance on processing of raw commodities and light manufacturing for export. Because the private sector was unwilling to undertake such needed industrial projects, Mahathir determined that the government would. Since then, Hicom has launched such initiatives as a national car project, a sponge iron and steel billet plant, a petroleum and petrochemical project, three motorcycle engine plants, cement factories, and a pulp and paper mill. Many of these projects are joint ventures with Japanese and some South Korean companies.

Central to Hicom has been Mahathir's "Look East" policy. While Malaysia has much to learn from the West, he says, there is also much to learn from the East, most especially from Japan. Japan has played a key role in joint ventures with Hicom and private businessmen. However, while the government has encouraged the relocation of companies to Malaysia, government reports warn of the limited development potential of light, export-oriented industries, such as the electronics industry, which offer Malays merely unskilled, low-paying assembly jobs, using imported materials at that. Therefore, key to the "Look East" policy is technology transfer, skill development programs, and educational exchanges.

The most significant Japanese-Malay project is the Malaysian national car, the Proton Saga, which has been on the market since 1985, and will begin to be exported to the United States this year. Though currently at least half of the parts are still being imported from Japan, its evolution into an all-Malaysian-made car is the focus around which high technology machine manufacturing industries, together with a skilled labor force, will be developed.

Not surprisingly, external factors in the world economy such as depressed commodity prices and the collapsed dollar have slowed down original projections for the Proton Saga's sales and development. Mahathir's critics were quick to join forces with such anti-development organizations as the United Nation's ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) in denouncing the national car project as

misguided and not viable. What they actually object to is any project which is national in scope and thus has the potential of both uniting the divergent elements of the country and positively fostering a sense a national accomplishment.

In another blow to the zero-growth efforts of the IMF-World Bank, Mahathir is advocating a population target of 70 million by the year 2100. The current population is about 16 million. One can almost hear the teeth-gnashing at the World Bank at such an outrageous display of national sovereignty!

The 'opposition'

The human rights group most often promoted by the international press as Mahathir's opposition is Aliran, whose president, Chandra Muzaffar, was recently arrested under the Internal Securities Act, and later released. It has attempted to unite all elements of the opposition, from Islamic fundamentalists to Chinese rights groups, in an effort to destabilize the country and overthrow what they call the Mahathir dictatorship. Aliran promotes the "small is beautiful" mentality, attacking technology, promoting environmentalism, advocating the legalization of drugs, and supporting "indigenous peoples' rights" groups. Not only does their publication promote the Singapore communists accused of plotting against the government, but Muzaffar has been denied entry into Singapore because of his stated support for the communists. Their 1987 conference featured speakers promoting Islamic fundamentalism, stating that Islam should be above the constitution.

Muzaffar himself, a recent convert to Islam, stated that the Malaysian constitution must reflect the fundamentalists' desire for an Islamic state. (It should be noted that even though Islam is the national religion, Malaysia is not a theocratic state, like Iran.)

Despite the fact that Aliran admits to having only 250 members, nonetheless, Muzaffar has received widespread sympathy "PR." It is clear that the human rights mafia, along with their Soviet and U.S. State Department sympathizers, consider development less of a democratic right, than the "freedom" to destabilize and overthrow the government of a sovereign nation.

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Japan strengthens ties to W. Europe

by Mary McCourt Burdman

Both Japan and the ASEAN nations—Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei—are seeking stronger economic and political ties with Western Europe, with two important motivations for these moves. The first is the disastrous U.S. trade policy and dollar collapse, which have created a crisis in U.S.-Asian relations. The second is the "Single Europe" act, which will transform Europe into the approximation of a single political-economic unit by Dec. 31, 1992, and which powerful banking forces are seeking to use to reorganize Europe into a neo-corporatist entity ruled by supranational cartels.

After their experiences with the United States, Japan and the ASEAN nations, all very dependent on exports, want to do all they can now to secure relations with the nations of Western Europe.

Takeshita's Mission

Japanese Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita, who visited Italy, the Vatican, Great Britain, and West Germany in a tour April 29-May 9, was quite explicit. "We have unveiled a new 'Japanese-European era,' " he said in Bonn May 6.

Before he left Tokyo, Takeshita told the Japanese press, "The international economy, that has so long been supported through the overwhelming strength of the U.S. economy, is changing; therefore, Japan and Western Europe must unite their strength with the U.S., to sustain the global system."

Of the "international cooperation initiative" he announced in London on May 4, he said, "There is an imperative need for effective and balanced cooperation, both politically and economically among the trilateral partners. It cannot be denied, however, that the relations between Japan and Europe, which form one side of the triangle, have not been close enough compared with the other two sides. . . . We must not allow this state of affairs to continue." According to reports on West German radio, he told Chancellor Helmut Kohl May 5 that Japan is interested in Europe because it considers Europe a much larger economy and a much more interesting future market than the United States. There is