

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AND MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

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 Analysis

There is no doubt that “Datuk Seri Mahathir bin Mohamad”, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, is a living legend. He served Malaysia as Prime Minister in 1981–2003 and again in 2018–20 and transformed Malaysia into an industrialized nation. Mohamad is also known as an outspoken person at national and international level.

He always expressed his mind disregard of the people he refers to; he recently criticized the normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Mahathir Mohamad sees the peace accord between Israel and UAE as flawed. He warned that the so-called landmark accord is a step back from peace and would create division among Muslims and would make the Muslim world into warring factions, and that “Israelis will add fuel to the fire” as he has been quoted.¹

Mahathir Mohamad is also known for his decisive political will. After being ousted from premiership this year, he tries to form a

new political party. He wants to challenge the current Prime Minister and his rival successor Muhyiddin Yassin whom he sees as a corrupt leader. The political crisis in Malaysia deepened when Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim’s “Hope Alliance” ruling coalition became dysfunctional.²

Mohamad has resigned from both premiership of the country and chairmanship of the “Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU)” that was part of the ruling coalition. He cited corruption inside the party as his reason behind his resignation.

Several members of his party wanted Mahathir to make an alliance with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), so he could form a new government. However he refused the proposal, his aim was to gain the support of each and every individual member of the Malaya Parliament so he would have absolute power to appoint his cabinet members. The

“Hope Alliance” coalition achieved a landslide victory that ousted Najib’s government in 2018 election.

Despite his retirement from active politics, Mahathir Mohamad played a major role in ending the political career of his immediate successor Abdullah Badawi and paved the way for Najib Razak to become Malaysia’s sixth prime minister. Later he became a harsh critic of Razak’s government and started to mobilize the Malaya citizens to remove him from power. He accused Razak of authoritarianism and allowing corruption on a scale that was unimaginable in previous governments in Malaysia.³

The massive level participation of apolitical citizens in the May 2018 election resulted in an extraordinary victory of Pakatan Harapan. Pakatan Harapan was a rainbow alliance that included the former party members of UMNO who differed with the party bosses. The alliance also included the Chinese ethnic dominated-DAP, as well as some ex-members of Malaysia’s largest Islamic party PAS.⁴

Finally, PKR head Anwar Ibrahim was designed to be Mohamad’s successor in the “Hope Alliance” government. For a while, the alliance achieved its target to end fifty-three years of UMNO’s dominance over Malaysian politics and captured the imagination of Malaya citizens who wanted a political transformation of the country.⁵

But their dream was shattered and the old guard of Malaya politics took overpower. Despite all of the negative development, Mohamad kept himself politically relevant. Hence this article will examine the life and politics of the octogenarian leader.

Mahathir Mohamad’s father was a schoolteacher. Mohamad received his education at Sultan Abdul Hamid College and completed his study in medicine at the University of Malaya in Singapore. Following his graduation in 1953, he began working as a medical officer until 1957, when he left the government job and started his

private practice. In 1964 he was elected as a parliament member through the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the dominant party within the government’s ruling coalition.⁶

Since the beginning of his political career, Mahathir Mohamad always raised his voice for the upliftment of the ethnic Malaya population who had been economically behind in comparison with other ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Indians. Mohamad differed with Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman as far as the economic policy was concerned. In 1969, Mahathir was forced to leave the party.

He rejoined the party in 1970, and in 1971, played a major role to pursue the government to introduce the New Economic Policy that enabled the ethnic Malays gain economic benefit. In 1972, he was elected as Supreme Council of UMNO and in 1974 he won the parliament seat and was appointed as Minister of Education.

The year of 1976 was a turning point for his political career when he became Deputy Prime Minister. In June 1981 he was elected as the head of UMNO. In the same year he became the Prime Minister of the country. He is regarded as the first person who came from an ordinary background and achieved the highest position in Malaya politics.

Mahathir Mohamad has been the longest prime minister of Malaysia. His tenure provided Malaysia a kind of political stability that was required for economic growth. He launched major economic reforms in Malaysia, encouraged foreign investment, restructured the taxation system, decreased trade tariffs and finally privatized several state-owned enterprises that were not functioning properly under the government ownership, which economically became a burden for the state.

There was a huge economic gap between the Malaya and other ethnic groups. The majority of the Malaya people were poor and their economy was undeveloped. Mohamad took affirmative steps to narrow the economic disparities between

the Malaya and other ethnic groups; he tried to bring general prosperity in Malaysia.⁷

The New Economic Policy that Mohamad adopted played major role in bringing economic success in the country. The policy particularly uplifted the Malaya people's life economically. In 1991, another economic policy that was called the "New Development Policy" was framed. This policy focused on economic growth for all; there would be no positive or negative discrimination, and poverty would be eliminated completely. Under Mohamad's premiership, Malaysia experienced rapid economic growth, manufacturing sector increased, a strong middle-class emerged among all ethnic groups, literacy rates, and life expectancies improved.

At the end of the 1990s, there was a meltdown in the Southeast Asian economy. In that period Malaysia also faced severe economic crises that caused differences between Mohamad and his expected successor, Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. To deal with the economic recession, Ibrahim was more in favor of reforming the economy; he wanted less state control on trade and open market system, he also suggested the increase of foreign investment. Mohamad was not ready to accept Ibrahim's suggestion, because he started to feel disillusioned with the West, and with Ibrahim.

Mohamad began to acknowledge Ibrahim as a political opponent and threat to his authority in the government. He removed Ibrahim from his position in 1998, and accused him of several crimes. Ibrahim's arrest and imprisonment brought Mohamad's political credibility under scrutiny and damaged the significance of Malaysia's rule of law. But Mohamad saw it as a good opportunity to suppress Ibrahim's supporters and consolidate his own power.⁸

Since 2008, Mohamad had not been very active in politics; he almost went into a retired mode. But gradually he became a harsh critic of his own protege Prime Minister Najib Razak due to his misuse of Malaysia's state-run development fund worth 1MDB. Opposition parties accused Razak to embezzle \$700 million from the 1MDB; international money laundering enquires initiated against him and several other Malaysian officials.⁹

In the beginning of 2018, Mohamad announced his comeback in active politics. He started to reorganize the opposition parties, surprisingly collaborated with his arch opponent Ibrahim. In the general election that was held on May 9, 2018, the 94 year-old Mohamad won the election with a narrow majority, his coalition gained 122 of the 222 seats. He became Prime Minister of Malaysia.¹⁰

During his election campaign, Mohamad ensured voters that he would transfer his power to Ibrahim after two years. The first step he took after resuming power was to seek pardon for Ibrahim from the royal court. A section of the ruling alliance disapproved of Ibrahim becoming the next Prime Minister. They joined hands with opposition groups to constitute a new government under Muhyiddin Yassin. Aside from his efforts to seek pardon for Ibrahim, there is a possibility that Mohamad disliked the idea of Anwar Ibrahim becoming the next Prime Minister of Malaysia.

In his long period of being prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad focused on two fronts. His first priority was to transform Malaysia into a modern, multi-cultural and economically developed nation. His second priority was to maintain his control on the ruling party to prevent any challenges towards his leadership. He used every available means

The main reason behind the alliance between Putin and the church are related to their shared views on the Russian national identity.



to achieve his goals; he particularly knitted politics with business. He gained the support of industrialists to keep his party financially strong and to actualize several modernizing project of his dream. Mohamad's critics say that Malaysia also paid the price for his dream

projects. Mahathir Mohamad is known to speak his mind freely whether it is about the Rohingya's problems, the Kashmir Issue or the plight of Palestinians; he recently criticized the normalization deal between UAE and Israel.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200821-ex-malaysia-pm-slams-uae-israel-normalisation-deal-as-divisive/>
- ² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/malaysia-s-mahathir-to-lead-new-warrior-party/1939304>
- ³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44028023>
- ⁴ <https://theconversation.com/how-malaysian-voters-defied-the-odds-and-ousted-corruption-96622>
- ⁵ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/malaysias-mahathir-says-he-has-support-to-return-as-pm/articleshow/74411099.cms?from=mdr>
- ⁶ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100126532>
- ⁷ <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/tun-dr-mahathir-of-malaysia-history-essay.php>
- ⁸ <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-4/mahathirs-economic-legacy/>
- ⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22338100>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics-mahathir-newsmaker-idUSKBN20O1Q1>

