

Interview

Retired, but Never Retiring

An Interview with His Excellency Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad,
Former Prime Minister, Malaysia



H.E. Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad

EDITORS' NOTE Reflecting upon 22 years as prime minister of Malaysia, His Excellency Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad admits that he still misses “the companionship and the camaraderie of my fellow members of the Cabinet,” a sense of warm fellowship that he believes “the country benefited from” over his long term in office. But despite such fond memories, he is nevertheless content to have passed the reins of power to his successor last year, and notes, with some satisfaction, that “the country is now doing well” after a “very smooth” transition period. Still a widely respected figure on the international stage – despite his self-professed tendency “to speak out against things that I consider to be wrong” no matter how “blunt” that may sound – Dr. Mahathir now fills his days giving “talks and speeches on a number of topics” to audiences around the world. This latest phase in his eminent career reflects a long-standing personal commitment to “change people’s values for the better.” And, while acknowledging that “you cannot change people as quickly as you might like to,” the former premier asserts that it is nevertheless “worth trying,” modestly concluding that he, at least, is “content with the little success” he has “achieved in this area.”

After qualifying as a doctor at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore, Dr. Mahathir worked in pri-

ivate practice and as a medical officer in the Malaysian government before entering Parliament in 1964. He rose swiftly through the ranks of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) political party and held several ministerial posts in the 1970s, including minister of education (1974-1978). In 1976 Dr. Mahathir was appointed deputy prime minister, and following a Cabinet reshuffle in 1978, relinquished the education portfolio for minister of trade and industry. After taking the helm of UMNO in 1981 as president, Dr. Mahathir assumed the leadership of the country as the fourth prime minister. One of Asia’s longest-serving leaders, he was reelected in 1982, 1986, 1990, and 1995, and retired from public office in October 2003.

You’re considered the father of modern Malaysia, as the country changed considerably during the 22 years you were prime minister. What is it like to become an elder statesman and, beyond that, to retire voluntarily in a part of the world where that is very unusual?

In my opinion, what people say about you is not as important as your own assessment of what you have done and what you have achieved. If you can be detached and look at yourself from outside, you can accurately assess your contribution. And I am quite satisfied with the contribution I have made to Malaysia. Whether or not people consider me an elder statesman is not important.

It must have been hard to leave a position like prime minister after 22 years, but, at the same time, you must have felt a sense of achievement that it was done so peacefully.

Yes, I’m very grateful for that. I chose to let go of my position; I was not pushed out. And the country is now doing well. Everything is very peaceful in Malaysia, and the transition has been very smooth. I think it is important not to outstay your welcome. You should go before people make it clear to you that it’s time for you to go. That’s what I’ve been able to do, and I feel very happy about it.

Is there anything you particularly miss about the job? A lot of political leaders who retire say they miss their country’s Air Force One?

No, I don’t miss that, but I do miss the companionship and the camaraderie of my fellow members of the Cabinet. There used to be a lot of laughter in Cabinet meetings, but we were able to make decisions about serious things at the same time. In fact, I think the country benefited from the camaraderie that was felt among Cabinet members. But other than that, I don’t miss much.

Looking around the world, there seem to be very few political leaders who convey a sense of true greatness. Why do you think that is?

Well, perhaps we have not asked for it. I agree that, in this day and age, it’s very difficult to identify very great leaders; people like Winston Churchill, for example, or Peter the Great, and others who stand out in history.

Of all the leaders you’ve met in your lifetime, who has impressed you the most?

Most of them are still alive, and I wouldn’t like to say anything that might hurt someone. I normally don’t make that kind of assessment of people.

You have been criticized in the past for speaking out on a number of sensitive topics. What is your response to that criticism?

I have been called an anti-Semitic person, and I’d like to take this opportunity to explain that I am not anti-Jew. I have many friends who are Jews. The fact is, I believe in pointing out people’s failures if they truly exist. For that reason, I have criticized my own people much more than I have criticized other groups of people.

So when you make provocative comments, you don’t mean to be antagonistic. Rather, you mean to be helpful.

Yes. I feel an obligation to speak out against things that I consider to be wrong. After all, Malaysia is criticized all the time, even though it is a small nation. We are told that we are not democratic,

and that we don't respect human rights. Some people have said that when I was prime minister, I put people under detention for no reason. None of that is true, but nevertheless, Malaysia has been criticized a lot. In my view, others should accept that they too must face criticism. If they criticize others, they should expect criticism of themselves. It's a very simple equation.

Will there ever be peace between Muslims and Jews?

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Historically, Muslims have never acted against Jews. In fact, it was usually Christians who carried out pogroms and inquisitions, and subjected Jews to all kinds of persecution, including the Holocaust. In the past, when Jews were oppressed, they often ran to Muslim countries. For example, when they were expelled from Spain, many of them chose to migrate to Muslim countries. So there is no historical tradition of Muslims persecuting Jews.

The case of Israel and Palestine is different because it is territorial. If you take part of a country and give it to landless people, it will lead to conflict. If you took any part of the United States, for example, and gave it to somebody else, there would be a fight about it. To resolve the Jewish problem in Europe, Palestine was given to the Jews. It's inevitable that the Palestinians are angry about that, because they were expelled from their own country.

The prime minister of Israel says that he's willing to work toward a solution to the problems.

Yes, and the world has to accept that Israel is a fact. My advice to the Israelis is this: Go back to the land that was allocated to you and allow the Arabs who were living in Israel before to come back and live there again. They should be able to reclaim the property that was taken away from them without compensation so long ago. They have been exiled for the

last 50 years and have been living in refugee camps.

Do you think that will happen in the future?

It's hard to say. There are hardliners in Israel as much as there are hardliners among the Palestinians, so that will be a factor. The United States could do a good job of pushing the problem toward a solution, as it is the only country that can really influence the Israelis. However, it doesn't want to exert its authority in this area.

On the topic of the United States, I feel very sorry that this country, which I used to respect so much and fully supported for many years, is no longer like it used to be. After World War II, we in Malaysia looked up to the United States: We thought it was a great country and considered it a model for everyone. We always thought we would be safe from any oppression by the United States, but today we believe that the United States is oppressing many countries in one way or another.

What do you think of President Bush?

Well, I tried my level best to get to know him and to be friendly with him, but I was disappointed when he made a statement about me that was not true. He said that he had scolded me for criticizing the behavior of Jews, Muslims, and Europeans, but in reality, he did no such thing. All kinds of fabricated phrases were used in the press. President Bush should not have confirmed that he had scolded me when he did not. I'm not someone who takes kindly to being scolded by anybody.

Do you think you and he will ever get together again?

Well, I'm no longer prime minister, so I don't think I hold any importance for him anymore.

You still have great influence in many parts of the world.

That's what people say, and the inference is that I can actually change people's minds about things. However, in reality I find it very difficult to get people to do what I think is right.

There are many in Malaysia, as in other parts of the world, who remember how vocal you were as prime minister. There was always a commentary by you in the morning papers about one topic or another. People say the current prime minister, Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has less impact than you. Do you agree?

No, he just has a different style. All leaders work in different ways. They may be equally effective but differ in their attitudes. Just because the new prime minister does not speak out as much as I did, it does not mean he is less interested in doing his job. He is just a mild-mannered person. I'm afraid I'm very brash in comparison. I am blunt, and I don't

hold back. I say what I feel I should say.

Now that you've left the post of prime minister, how do you keep busy?

I do a lot of different things. There are a great many people who still want to see me, and I get many requests to give talks and speeches on a number of topics. In fact, I'm extremely busy most of the time.

Many young people going out into the world today are concerned about the obstacles that may lie ahead. What messages of inspiration do you have for them?

Young people must remain optimistic, and they must hold on to their ideals. We should motivate them to strive to change the world for the better. Of course, later on in life they are going to find that their ideals are not so easily followed, but knowing that does not mean

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that they shouldn't try. After all, maybe they will succeed in making a difference.

Is that the attitude you had when you were starting out?

Well, when I was very young, I believed it would be very easy to change things. It turns out that I was a bit naïve. I thought I could change people's values for the better, but after many years of trying, I've had very little success in that area. Generally speaking, you cannot change people as quickly as you might like to, but nevertheless, I would say it's worth trying. For me, it has certainly been worth the effort, and I am content with the little success I have achieved in this area.

In your opinion, what is your greatest achievement?

That's very difficult to say, because I don't enjoy assessing my own achievements. From what I have seen, different people have different opinions about what contribution I have made.

Some might expect you to say your grandchildren.

Well, they are certainly one of my greatest achievements! ●