

Malaysia's Mahathir

Assessing an enigmatic Asian leader



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

PEOPLE have witnessed a number of celebrated leaders in Asia in the past century. They were mostly national leaders, war heroes and founding fathers of their countries. Under this category one can name Mao Ze Dong, Kim Il Sung, Soekarno, Gandhi, Nehru, Jimmah, Nasser, Lee Kwan Yew and others.

Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohammad belongs to a different category. He never waged a war of liberation nor became a founding father. Yet, he has become a great leader of the Malaysian people. Nay, he has emerged as a leader of Asia and of the developing world.

Mahathir's contribution to the all-round development of Malaysia is phenomenal and outstrips that of any of his predecessors, who were also illustrious. He led his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and also ruled the nation for the past 22 years. One of the longest in history and, undoubtedly, in his country. Political leaders would generally like to nurture a vision and would like to implement it as well as possible. Most fail. Those who succeed are limited in number. Mahathir is one of those who succeeded.

The Malayan Peninsula, like many other parts of Asia, was colonised by European powers. Firstly, it was done by the Portuguese in the early 16th century, followed by the Dutch and finally by the English. The colony got independence in 1957 and became Malaysian Federation in 1963 under constitutional monarchy followed by accession of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak to the Peninsular Malaysian states. Singapore seceded in 1965, without the mainland feeling any qualms about it. The government was not unhappy, as it secured good ridance of the overwhelming Chinese population of Singapore. The Malaysians are very particular, rather obsessed, with their ethnic purity or superiority. They are the original inhabitants, *Bhumiputras*, and constitute a majority of the population. They regard the other two ethnic races, the Chinese and the Indians, with a degree of caution, if not distrust. The inter-racial marriages are few and not particularly encouraged.

The country is endowed with rich natural resources - tin, rubber, palm oil, timber and the black gold. Out of the 13 constituent states nine have traditional monarchs, wielding limited authority. But these monarchs assume the position of Supreme Ruler of the Federation through election. After the mysterious death of a golf boy in the company of the Sultan of Johor, the then Supreme Ruler, Prime Minister Mahathir clipped many of the royal privileges by legislation. The abundant natural

resources of the country were not properly exploited till years after independence. The Malaysian people had generally lived a life of bliss and loved to maintain the tradition of ease and comfort in an atmosphere of self-complacency. After independence, the educated Malayan youth took up government service as the most desired profession. Meanwhile, the others, particularly the Chinese, occupied most of the business and added to the prosperity of their community.

Mahathir proved to be an excellent

manager of the national resources. His efforts were directed to the creation of adequate infrastructure on which a solid industrial base could be established. Investment, both domestic and foreign, abounded, due especially to the remarkable peace and stability enjoyed by the country. More so now when many of the rich Arab investors are looking for a secure and prosperous Muslim country to invest in. The skyscrapers in downtown Kuala Lumpur, the tallest twin-towers in the world in particular, pose rightfully as objects of pride for the Malaysians. Mahathir strived hard and worked relentlessly to make Malaysia, with its 25 million people, as a developed nation and a model in the developing world.

detention in jail on what are generally regarded as minor offences. Anwar Ibrahim also has many followers in UNMO who described Mahathir's action as autocratic. His wife is leading the movement to free Ibrahim with a view to securing political restoration for her husband.

Mahathir has been in focus on the global arena in the recent past. That was because of his free and frank views boldly expressed to the surprise of many. Asian stock market, which had been flourish-

ing beyond people's expectations, collapsed in post-1997 era. Mahathir came out with scathing criticisms against those, who had mishandled and manipulated the financial crisis. Since then, he became a more ardent advocate of the poor and the oppressed, and basically sought to uphold interests of the developing world. In the process, his frequent articulation of topical though sensitive global political and economic issues annoyed the West. But the latter could not bridle him, because Mahathir's nation no longer

depended much on the West and could not be influenced like many other developing nations. The last annual general session of the UMNO, held in Kuala Lumpur on 19 and 20 June, was of special significance. Mahathir further elaborated, and more strongly this time, his customary criticisms of the West's double standard and hypocrisy with the Third World. Besides, it was the last session that Mahathir attended as President of the UMNO as well as Prime Minister of Malaysia. With deep emotion, a tearful Mahathir declared that he was going to relinquish the reins of his party and the government later this year. This voluntary abdication after 22 years of undisputed leadership became a shining example to those, who are in his shoes. Perhaps, Mahathir could continue longer, but not without criticisms. He has chosen the wise and just step. When I asked him about his future plans, he gave a smile -- a meaningful smile. I went on further to say that he had been far too long in politics to stay away from it totally even after retirement. I also ventured to ask him whether he would like to assume the role of a Lee Kuan Yew or a Gandhi. Mahathir's grin spread. "Not a Senior Minister in the Cabinet (like Lee Kuan Yew), but I don't know for certain what I would do after retirement," chuckled the Prime Minister. Whether he writes, preaches or simply sees or guides his people, Mahathir, now 78 and in good health, will certainly wield an enigmatic influence not merely on his country but also on the developing, particularly Asian, nations for as long as he lives.

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Prime Minister Dr Mahathir with the writer and others at the UMNO conference.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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But a prime feature of Mahathir's endeavours constituted in his encouraging and giving special facilities to the ethnic Malaysians. He knew that national progress and individual prosperity can be achieved not merely out of agriculture but through business, commerce and industry. He, therefore, aimed at creating a class of entrepreneurs, financiers and business people among the Bhumiputras. This is one of the landmarks of his success for which ethnic Malaysians, as a race, are indebted to him for providing them with a better and more prosperous life.

As for his party, Mahathir manifested extreme devotion to the cause of fulfilment of the objectives of the UMNO, which has led the ruling coalition and others that governed the nation since independence. UMNO is primarily an ethnic party with a strong Islamic base. It pursues a policy, which can be generally described as right of the center. But even Mahathir had to encounter troubles brewed by his trusted lieutenant, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim had a long and upbeat political career from his student days and practically became heir apparent to Mahathir. But ambition, impatience and personality clash caused Ibrahim's downfall and

the age group in which a youth is, signifies the transformation of an adolescent to a young person, which usually is accompanied with the trials and tribulations of a 'child' in becoming a 'grown-up'. A bundle of exuberant but undirected energy, he derives pleasure in taking risks and experimenting with new things. He craves to taste the 'forbidden fruits' in his quest for attaining recognition and status amongst his peers. Such a behaviour often brings him in open or

concealed conflict with his parents and 'parent figures' which leads to the much discussed 'conflict of generations' and 'generation gap'. The situation has been further complicated due to the fast paced social transformation brought in the society by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and rural-urban migration. It has eroded the traditional, informal, social control mechanisms and has even brought in changes in the structure of the family, from joint to nuclear, or at best an extended family. The 'media explosion' has shrunk the world, especially for the youth, and they are now more aware of things around. This has also raised their level of aspiration and ambition. With materialism, consumerism and individualism gaining ascendancy, modern youth is drifting away from his traditional roots and finds it difficult to cope with ever increasing social pressures. Further, the increasing economic pressures compel more and more parents to

take full time employment leaving a child, more so a youth, alone in the house or in the company of friends. With no adequate programmes available to keep them busy, they become easy prey to anti-social activities including drug-abuse.

There may be various reasons for a youth to take to drug abuse, from just curiosity and a tendency to experiment with. It may be an expression of his revolt against established authority, a way of gaining recognition in his group or he may just not be able to say 'NO', when offered. Therefore awareness creation or preventive education programme for youth is an imperative. In build up immunity amongst them, would promote self-respect and determination, provide experiences which encourage self-respect and sense of dignity, enhances personal and social skill which are necessary for functioning in a rapidly transforming society and provide for professional skills.

What is more important is that the leisure time activities of both student and non-student youth are so organised that they provide for healthy recreation and constructive work habits. As is evident, a youth feels more at home within his age-group. Therefore, to reach them, it is but natural to take the help of more active groups among them. In Bangladesh, a strong emphasis has been placed on awareness building against drug-abuse among youth as they are considered to be the most precious asset for human resource development. Financial and technical assistance is provided by the government and NGO's to help them undertake activities such as socio-cultural programmes. Experience has shown such programmes have a salutary impact, if backed by a good follow-up programme. It has also been realised that youth power can be harnessed not only from preventing youths from the malady of addiction but also by improving the environment they live in. One such example is the 'Rainy Day' concert organised by Prithom Alo to observe the International Day against Drug Abuse and Trafficking. Some 15000 youths saying 'No to drugs' vowed to launch a nationwide movement against drug.

I take my hats off to Anusheh who had the gut to narrate her once drug addicted life. Anusheh, you can be a good ambassador to help the drug addicts return to their original track. Such activities/programmes help to identify

addicts in their own peer groups. Dare devils as the youth are, they prove to be an asset in reaching rather inaccessible areas of the community, such as, pockets of addiction. Many a time, due to their connection with traffickers, pushers and pedlars, it becomes difficult to impress upon addicts to leave their habit. It is here that the youths, voluntary organisations have not only been able to create awareness but also have been able to muster support for combating

trafficking, pushing and peddling drug. No youth programme can be successful if not given adequate support, encouragement and recognition by the society itself. It is hoped that more MNC's will involve with motivational programmes against drug abuse by the youth. Congrats to Prithom Alo for coming forward to organise the concert for a noble cause -- after all youths are the next generation of a nation and no nation wants to have a generation

derailed because of drug addiction. In conclusion I wish to say that no drug addicts should be looked down upon, they need care, compassion and counseling, so that they can turn over a new leaf in their life like Anusheh. In this regard the adage is worth quoting -- "every sinner has a future, just as a saint has a past"

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The stress factor in policing

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

IN our country the prevalence of stress amongst working policemen is felt but not discussed as an unhealthy factor in law enforcement. Newspaper reports on police excesses and irregularities may be treated as ominous indications of job stress having an impact on management. Job stress is no doubt part of working environment and the policeman's environment does not escape from this reality. Purposeful management of stress can lead to effective performance. However, excessive stress will produce adverse effects and thus has to be prevented. Since police as an organisation actually provides social service, unhealthy result to occupational stress needs to be seriously studied in public interest.

In the USA an International Law Enforcement Stress Association (ILESA) was formed in 1978 which published its own quarterly magazine entitled "Police Stress". Experience there shows that police is a uniquely high stress occupation. The incidents of police high handedness, unjustified use of physical violence and verbal abuse, negative image of the police as being discourteous, inhuman, sadistic and inefficient should in fact prompt the well-meaning reformer to look beyond the surface and discover the underlying strain that exists. The noticeably paradoxical nature of the policeman's job makes it like tightrope walking and deserves a closer scrutiny than is accorded to it so far in our country.

Few occupations require the employees to face the kind of dangerous situation that police personnel encounter as part of routine. The functions of police are preservation of law and order to safeguard people from attack and to protect property among others. We expect the cop to play the varied roles with equal élan. He is a helper, saviour, friend and referee. To enforce law he uses force and make an arrest. This roller-coaster ride is a process difficult to understand functionally and incomprehensible emotionally.

The police are expected to accomplish mood swings from loving father, understanding spouse to a lathi-wielding defender of law facing a riotous mob. The job makes great demand on the mental, emotional and physical capabilities of the officers, demands that are all too often so stressful that begin to destroy the individual. Law enforcement tends to impose a higher degree of stress

and a multiplicity of stressful situations on the individual than do most other professions. The policemen encounter the dark side of human nature, quite often facing the reality of irrational violence. With the growing incidence of crime and widening role expectations, the mental and physical health of police personnel assumes greater significance.

Neglected family life: The policeman's family life deserves more attention that it has received so far. A heavy toll is exacted from the wives, children and relatives of police personnel by the stressful aspects of police work. The disruptive effects of irregular work schedules on family centered activities, delinquency, school and adjustment problems among children are a heavy price paid by the police family. A detailed British study by (Cain 1973) found police wives from both urban and rural areas felt that their children suffered from constantly changing shifts as

dom. However, the unpredictable nature of potential danger gives rise to hyper-vigilant mental state. The almost constant state of peak preparedness tends to wear the police officer down as much as if he were in actual danger. Survey in India reports work overload as the second highest ranking job related stressor (Pragya Mathur 1993). In Bangladesh, the strength of police personnel per 1000 population is very unfavourable to the former in terms of effective and satisfactory service. Large number of policemen in our situation will say that they have to toil for more than 12 hours a day daily, without any weekly offs. There is also excessive paper work as an internal stressor in our law enforcement. The heavier burden carried by our policemen needs to be studied for healthy solution.

Noxious physical environment: The physical work environment of the police exposes them to high levels of air pollution and excessive

The reason why we cannot neglect the uniquely high stress occupation of law enforcement is that besides being a high cost in terms of impaired psychological, social and physical functioning of members of the police force, stress can impair job performance which in turn can lead to poor response to community needs.

noise (riots, mobs, traffic etc.) which are great stressors. Experts hold the view that policemen working constantly in adverse environmental conditions suffer damage to health and efficiency. Studies in India indicate that traffic policemen exposed for long hours to auto exhaust gasses suffer from lung disorders, reduced breathing capacity, excessive carbon monoxide in blood and several other ailments. Policemen, therefore, are a high risk group exposed to a physical environment which deserves greater attention than it has received so far from concerned authority.

Praise and recognition: Recognition and incentive are not broader in our law enforcement. Policing appears to be a thankless job with more than its share of brickbats and few bouquets. Unfavourable public image of the police further compound the issue of lack of recognition. Policemen are expected to believe that what they do is important but they do not feel encouraged at the sight of their low social status and the public's opinion of them.

Job boredom and work overload: Law enforcement mostly entails considerable boredom; patrol work primarily involves routine, boring tasks which can lull an officer into complacency. Long periods of physical inactivity and repetitive work may induce bore-

dom. However, the unpredictable nature of potential danger gives rise to hyper-vigilant mental state. The almost constant state of peak preparedness tends to wear the police officer down as much as if he were in actual danger. Survey in India reports work overload as the second highest ranking job related stressor (Pragya Mathur 1993). In Bangladesh, the strength of police personnel per 1000 population is very unfavourable to the former in terms of effective and satisfactory service. Large number of policemen in our situation will say that they have to toil for more than 12 hours a day daily, without any weekly offs. There is also excessive paper work as an internal stressor in our law enforcement. The heavier burden carried by our policemen needs to be studied for healthy solution.

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Various diseases that include diabetes, heart ailments, circulatory and digestive disorders and others have been found to be linked to stress. With this information available and with the knowledge that policing is a high stress occupation, it appears most logical to study the phenomenon of police stress systematically. Stress in law enforcement should be a common concern for policemen, people and social scientists. An investigation of police stress would help to increase the level of functioning of line policemen by recognising the unique factors affecting his emotional needs and also provide channels to aid him in this area. The base of human relations expertise and human resources management could be broadened by this combination of social purpose and systematic observation. The reason why we cannot neglect the uniquely high stress occupation of law enforcement is that besides being a high cost in terms of impaired psychological, social and physical functioning of members of the police force, stress can impair job performance which in turn can lead to poor response to community needs.

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