

Malaysia

Malaysian maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in turbulent times

By BARRY WAIN

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Barry Wain's controversial book on Malaysia's fourth prime minister was almost banned by the Malaysian government when it first rolled off the press. It is indeed an achievement that it was not, perhaps because it was a fair and balanced portrayal of the man in question. It manages to focus on the personal, even heart-warming sides of Mahathir Mohamad, the family man, but ends up as a powerful treatise on Malaysian politics. The most useful concept that Wain has stated (just once on p. 53) in describing Malaysia under Mahathir was that the man had created a *party-state*. The exploration of this concept was not the book's intention but it has inadvertently provided much data to chart the birth of this party-state, how it reached its apex and how it would eventually decline. The party-state, though not elaborated by Wain, appears as the outcome of the Mahathir-rule. Before this, studies on the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan have noticed the blurring of the distinction between party and state, hence the notion of the party-state. The book provides even more grounds to undertake a comparative study of all seemingly 'party-states' of Asia — under the helms of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaysia, Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan and the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, to name some of the more outstanding ones.

Chapters 3 to 6 are crucial in charting the growth of the party-state. In these chapters Mahathir is shown to have achieved his crowning moment in deploying his Machiavellian prowess, saving himself and the party from being outvoted and de-registered, respectively. The manoeuvre to outflank his rivals and the threat of a court judgement to outlaw UMNO provided the motivation for him to upset the separation-of-powers doctrine of the modern state. Hereafter were sowed the seeds of the party-state — UMNO swiftly got into big business, monopolised it and undermined the liberal constitutionalism of the state in order to supplant it with the party. By 1988 UMNO succeeded in accumulating vast amount of resources under this arrangement.

In connection with the party's aggrandisement, chapter 6 is a fascinating, if not troubling read. Here Wain revisits Malaysia's past financial scandals from the mid-1980s till the late 1990s by presenting them as a series of Mahathir failures. The losses suffered by the country from the tin-trading fiasco, the BMF affair, the Forex trashing and the Perwaja mess are all skilfully traced in this chapter. The conservative estimate of the worth of these failures was a US\$32 billion loss for the nation. It is not that these incidences of mismanagement were not exposed before, but having them all documented in one read allows one to discern a certain character and pattern to the party-state.

Chapter 7 is about Mahathir's penchant for big projects and colossal structures. Chapter 8 is another invaluable chapter, as it documents how Mahathir had tamed the

Malay royalty by removing their judicial immunity. Chapter 9 is about Mahathir's exploit of pragmatic Islam to shore up his credentials, which in the end slipped out of his control. Chapter 10 details his performance in the international relations stage, where he was most successful as a Third World persona, admired by outsiders as the champion of the Southern underdogs. But even so he failed to resist the West, being easily persuaded in supporting many unpopular resolutions such as the one that approved the invasion of Iraq in 1990.

While the book is an excellent account of events from a vantage point of having Mahathir as the central, arresting character of the plot, a picture of Malaysia would not have been complete if bit players and marginal actors were also not considered. In this regard, Wain's book says little about the involvement of civil society or even of Mahathir's detractors in being responsible for many of his rhetorical and behavioural eccentricities. There are many ways of looking at history. One way is to have all analysis centred around one person, which Wain had expertly done. But the other way is to look at the larger, *longue-durée* perspective within which a person operates. It may be transformational moments rather than emblematic personalities that inform history. On this the book has its shortcomings.

Wain's book leaves a lingering question — despite the seemingly iconoclastic and non-conformist positions and posturing that Mahathir took: how much of the world or Malaysia did he change? For journalists and scholars, Mahathir's paradoxes will continue to serve as a veritable textual goldmine in the production of more papers and books. But there is a critical need to theorise on the implications of this peculiarly enigmatic personality upon the survival of the modern-liberal state.

MAZNAH MOHAMAD

National University of Singapore

Overwhelming terror: Love, fear, peace, and violence among Semai of Malaysia

By ROBERT KNOX DENTAN

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This book is a major contribution to the ethnography of the Semai, an indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, and to the literature on non-violent and egalitarian societies. It is very unusual in its style of presentation. The author attempts – with considerable success – to get beyond the bland generalisations that anthropologists normally use to describe the 'culture' of a people. His goal is to convey how the Semai *feel* about the world and their lives and to show how their emotions affect their behaviour. The experimental style makes the book more vivid and engaging than most anthropological monographs, but it also makes it somewhat disjointed.

The main focus of the book is the question of why Semai social life is non-violent, a question the author has been pondering since his initial fieldwork with the Semai in