

# A Doctor's Duty is to Heal the Unhealthy: The Story of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

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## Abstract

Mahathir Mohamad was born in 1925 in Alor Star, Kedah. He entered the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore in 1947 and graduated in 1953. His years in the medical school equipped young Mahathir with the training necessary to assess and diagnose a problem, before dispensing the appropriate treatment. Throughout his later years in the political limelight, Dr Mahathir recognised the very important role the medical college had in laying the strong foundation for his successful career. He joined UMNO in 1945, already interested in politics at the tender age of 20; he was first elected into Parliament in 1964. The vigorous expression of his candid views did not go down well during the troubled days following the 13 May 1969 racial riots and he was expelled from UMNO, his writings were banned, and he was considered a racial extremist. Nevertheless, his intellectual and political influence could not be ignored for long; he returned to Parliament in 1974, and became the fourth, and longest serving, Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981. Dr Mahathir has found fame as a Malay statesman, and an important Asian leader of the twentieth century with much written, locally and internationally, debating his policies. This article, using Dr Mahathir's own writings, starts with his description of his early life, proceeds to look at his medical career, then touches on his diagnosis of the problems plaguing the Malays, before concluding with his views on the need to stand up to the prejudices and pressures of the Western world. Throughout his life, Dr Mahathir behaved as the ever-diligent medical doctor, constantly studying the symptoms to diagnose the cause of the ills in his community and country, before proceeding to prescribe the correct treatment to restore good health. It is a measure of his integrity and intellectual capability that he did not seek to hide his failures, or cite unfinished work in an attempt to cling to political power.

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## Introduction

Mahathir Mohamad was born in 1925 in Alor Setar, Kedah. In 1947, after living through the turbulent times of the Second World War, he entered the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. He graduated in 1953, and was in government service for the next 4 years before starting private general practice in his hometown. He joined UMNO in 1945, already interested in politics at the tender age of 20; he was first elected into Parliament in 1964.<sup>1</sup> The vigorous expression of his candid views did not go down well during the troubled days following the 13 May 1969 racial riots and he was expelled from UMNO and considered an extremist. Nevertheless, his intellectual and political influence could not be ignored for long; he returned to Parliament in 1974, and became the fourth, and longest serving, Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981.

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an important Asian leader of the twentieth century with much written, locally and internationally, debating his policies.<sup>2-4</sup> The man himself is also a prolific writer, and he even wrote articles for the *Straits Times* and *Sunday Times* in Singapore to help finance his medical education.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his busy days as Prime Minister, he found time to continue writing numerous books and articles. Thus, in telling the story of this illustrious alumnus of the medical faculty, it is only appropriate that his own words be used. This article starts with his description of his early life, proceeds to look at his medical career, then touches on his diagnosis of the problems plaguing the Malays, before concluding with his views on the need to stand up to the prejudices and pressures of the Western world. Throughout his political career, Dr Mahathir behaved as the ever-diligent medical doctor, constantly studying the symptoms to diagnose the cause of the ills in his community and

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### Early Life and the Japanese Occupation

Those who lived through the colonial era and the Japanese Occupation were deeply affected by the events of those times, as TJ Danaraj and Lee Kuan Yew both wrote in their autobiographies.<sup>6,7</sup> When the Japanese landed, young Mahathir was an impressionable 16-year-old, and the events of the next 3 years had a lasting impact on his life.

I was born in 1925 in the town of Alor Setar in northwestern Malaya (as Malaysia was then called), the youngest of ten children. My parents belonged to the lower middle-class and we lived in what would be called a slum area today. My father worked as a schoolteacher and later as a government auditor. He brought up his family to be very orthodox, very disciplined, and very oriented towards education.

The Malay Peninsula was at that time, before World War II, under British rule. We were divided into many different Malay states and each state had its own treaty with the British. The treaties were for British “protection”, it was said, not colonisation. We were a British protectorate and as such retained a certain degree of independence in terms of domestic administration. Foreign and military affairs were controlled by the British, although they invariably encroached even on domestic affairs. The British were not too repressive. They could have colonised us fully from the beginning, but chose to create a protectorate image. Although the British actually controlled the administration fully, they managed to give the impression that the locals had status and authority. The Malaysian sultans were called “the rulers” by the British, although they were never really given any power to “rule”. The British did not send a “governor” to our country, but an official they called a “British Adviser”. In reality, however, his so-called “advice” had to be strictly followed. The British were extremely clever at this form of semi-colonial rule: they would call things by one name, but in reality do quite another thing. What we did get from them was a well-organised administrative system and a fairly well developed infrastructure. What we also got, however, as a psychological burden, was the belief that only Europeans could govern our country effectively. Most of Asia in those days was controlled by the Europeans. India, Burma, Singapore and Hong Kong were under British rule; Indonesia was governed by the Dutch; Vietnam,

Cambodia and Laos were under French influence. Most Asians felt inferior to the European colonisers and rarely did we even consider independence a viable option. Asia was a region without pride and self-confidence and our economies were structured to serve the European demand for raw materials and natural resources.

The Japanese rule lasted about three years. There is no doubt in my mind that people across the Asian continent suffered immensely from the war and many were unjustly killed or captured. The initial Japanese defeat of the Europeans did, however, also have another psychological effect on many Asians. Before the war, when Malaya was under British rule, our entire world-view was that we had no capability to be independent. We thought that only the Europeans could run our country, and felt we had to accept their superiority. But the success of the Japanese invasion convinced us that there is nothing inherently superior in the Europeans. They could be defeated, they could be reduced to groveling before an Asian race, the Japanese. Before the Japanese Occupation, the Japanese were reputed to be producers of the worst quality goods in the world; cheap goods that were not durable at all. The war, however, changed my attitude, first of all because they were able to defeat the British. The Japanese were definitely a very disciplined people, very rigid in the way they stood, in the way they saluted and addressed their superiors. This somehow impressed upon me and later convinced me that with discipline you can master almost anything. Thus there was a new awakening amongst us that if we wanted to, we could be like the Japanese. We did have the ability to govern our own country and compete with the Europeans on an equal footing.<sup>8</sup>

### Medical College and Medical Practice

His years in the King Edward VII College of Medicine equipped young Mahathir with the training necessary to assess and diagnose a problem, before dispensing the appropriate treatment. It was also in medical school that he met his wife of almost five decades, Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Throughout his later years in the limelight, Dr Mahathir always found time and pleasant words for his alma mater, for he recognised the very important role the medical college had in laying a strong foundation for his successful political career.

I felt the need to get a higher education to be accepted as a leader, and rather than devoting my

entire career to politics, I chose to go to Singapore in 1947 to study medicine. The six years from 1947 to 1953 were mainly devoted to my studies and my political activities were put on the backburner. While in Singapore I was still following the developments in Malaysia keenly. I took a correspondence course in journalism thinking that writing would give me the opportunity to earn some money. I contributed articles to the local *Sunday Times* about Malay life and culture, writing about the Malay fishermen or the Malay women and their social and political problems. Finally, I did save enough money to buy myself a motorcycle in Singapore. At my college I was also organising Malay student groups, not so much for political purposes, but rather to help them achieve better academic results. Singapore was also the place where I met my wife, Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. We went to the same college and before my first year was over, we had become steady. Although there was no formal engagement until we had graduated, we assumed from the beginning that we would eventually get married. My wife had obtained a scholarship to Singapore and was only the second Malay woman to study medicine at that time. It was very unusual in the late 1940s for a Malay woman to get any higher education, but like my own, her father was a strict disciplinarian who insisted on his children getting a proper education. My wife and I later raised seven children, three of them adopted. Through all my years, first as a general practitioner, later a senior politician, the family has remained an important pillar in my life. I believe the family is the anchor which keeps us stable in a complex society. The family gives you something to cling on to and something to fall back on in times of hardship and change. I try to be with my family as much as possible, even today, and if somebody invites me for lunch I feel slightly disappointed because I cannot go back to my house and my family. I value the family very much and have always tried to promote family values as a central part of my policies and political visions.

It was on August 31, 1957 that Malaysia finally became an independent nation. I had returned from Singapore in 1953 and was employed as a doctor in the government service. As a civil servant, I was not allowed to be active in politics and I was thus only marginally involved in the events that led to independence. There was a certain euphoria in the first days of independence, but this feeling quickly gave way to concern about how to govern the country on our own. People started talking about

filling in the “independence gap” and rural development became a central theme for political leaders. Just before independence, I decided to leave my position as a doctor in the government service to set up my own medical practice. This was the only way I could be more actively involved in politics. I opened my practice, the MAHA clinic, in 1957 in my hometown, Alor Setar. This was one of the only five private clinics in the town and the first one to be established by a Malay. I became quite busy as a private practitioner and would get calls from patients throughout the night. I made housecalls and performed minor surgery, but this was certainly not a practice that was making me rich. There was no government health insurance and charges for treatment were very cheap: \$3 for an examination, \$5 if injections were given, and \$6 for housecalls, as I remember it. When I look back, I think my medical training and years as a practitioner have stood me in good stead. It has made me better able to diagnose any given situation. When I was an active practitioner, I used to be able to diagnose people very quickly; when a person with malaria or another serious disease entered the room, I immediately knew what he suffered. That training later became very useful to me in politics where you constantly need to gauge people’s reactions and must be able to tell whether or not you are hearing the truth. I once told *The Economist* that politics is a good profession for people with medical training. Doctors go through the process of observing a patient, recording his or her medical history, then you make a physical examination, do lab tests, and finally arrive at a diagnosis. The process is basically the same in politics. When I encounter a political problem, I go through the routine of observing all aspects of the problem including its historical dimensions, analysing it in detail to identify all the signs and symptoms, then I do “lab tests”, and finally I reach a conclusion and prescribe a course of action. Another quality I gained from practicing medicine was a certain compassion and sense of responsibility for people in need. As a doctor you try to understand people’s ailments as well as their feelings – their depressions or their joys – and this has no doubt served me well in later years. Today, most politicians may start out their careers as lawyers, but in the past, during the colonial period, many were doctors. The British colonialists actually believed it was safer to train a doctor than a lawyer; a lawyer would only give them a lot of trouble. As it turned out, however, quite a number of doctors became prominent in

independence movements everywhere.

While working in my medical practice, I also deepened my involvement in national politics. I was appointed to a senior post in the state branch of the leading political party, UMNO, and despite working long hours at my clinic, I always managed to find time for political activities. I first became a member of parliament in 1964 at the age of 39. I still continued my medical practice, now with the help of a good friend of mine who had the managerial sense to make the clinic survive even when I had to spend an increasing amount of time in politics. Indeed, I did not withdraw fully from my work as a doctor until I first became a minister in the government in 1974.<sup>8</sup>

### The Malay Debate: A Dilemma for Malaysia

Dr Mahathir was labeled a Malay-ultra in the 1970s. His study of the social-cultural nature of the Malays, published as *The Malay Dilemma*, was banned, and he himself was almost arrested.<sup>1,9</sup> Yet, 30 years later, it was the non-Malay vote that saw Dr Mahathir retain power in the 1999 general elections, and his views on the path to peace and prosperity in Malaysia finds approval even from the Chinese.<sup>10</sup> In fact, prior to his retirement, Dr Mahathir spoke emotionally, and at great length on his disappointment with the development of the Malays.<sup>11</sup> It is a measure of his integrity and intellectual capability that he did not seek to hide his failures, or cite unfinished work in an attempt to cling to political power.<sup>12</sup>

Much more needs to be done if the racial disparity is to be reduced and the potential for violence diminished. University entrance is but one small facet of a massive problem. However, unless it is attended to it will aggravate and complicate the existing racial disparity.

Whether there will be more or fewer drop-outs will depend upon teaching and standards. Repeat students from the Faculty of Medicine in Singapore have been known to get distinctions when they left to continue in other universities. Applicants rejected from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya have gone to study medicine abroad and are doing extremely well. Students who failed repeatedly in Singapore are now respected specialists holding post-graduate qualification from universities abroad. On the other hand, “distinction kids” have failed their pre-medical course while brilliant graduates have failed to get foreign post-graduate qualifications. At least one distinguished professor failed to obtain M.R.C.P. London. It can be seen that examination results are not the perfect criteria that they are made out to be.

To correct the imbalance in the progress of the different communities in Malaysia requires both immediate and long-term measures. Improving rural schools, rural health, etc., are long-term measures that are already being carried out but are subject to the transcendental margin that I spoke of. In the meantime, short-term measures must also be taken. The task before this nation is a tricky and delicate one. Not only must class disparity be reduced but racial disparity and division must also be removed. The Government is doing a lot but it is not enough that the Government should do things. It is also necessary that the people should realise this and make helpful suggestions. Adopting an attitude of hurt-righteousness is not going to help anyone.

In America, Britain, Africa and neighbouring countries racial intolerance leading to riots and violence has become a feature. If we are not to join them it would be wise to learn from them the etiology, the signs and the symptoms. It would be wiser to institute preventive measures now rather than wait for the actual event. Being in close contact with the rural *bumiputera* who are incapable of writing intelligent letters in English, I know that the signs and symptoms are already there. If I may say so again, soon it may be too late.<sup>13</sup>

The differences between town Malays and the *kampong* Malays became even more emphasised. The Malays of the rural areas remained purebred. Socially they mixed hardly at all with non-Malays, and were exclusively farmers with no interest in trade or craftsmanship. Deeply religious, orthodox Muslims, the Malays nevertheless remained in abiding fear of the evil spirits of their past animist beliefs. The town Malays were usually of mixed Malay-Indian or Malay-Arab descent. They moved freely among non-Malay Muslims. They had been ousted from business by the Chinese, but had made progress as officials and administrators. Although they were good Muslims, they were more tolerant of other religions, and to a large extent they had rejected their animist past.

Communication between rural Malays and town Malays was further hindered by lack of roads. The roads built by the British linked only the towns and were merely sufficient for administrative purposes and for the exportation of rubber and tin. Education remained at a low level, and news could not be disseminated freely in the rural areas. No real attempt was made to improve the earning capacity of the farmers. Finally, the health of the

rural people was completely neglected. Malaya abounded with various debilitating, endemic diseases like malaria and yaws. In addition, small epidemics of cholera and dysentery occurred at regular intervals. As often happens to a community subjected to continuous exposure to these diseases, the rural Malays developed a certain amount of resistance. They survived, but all their energy was depleted. Malaria, for example, affected practically all rural Malays. Rendered weak and dull by lack of blood and frequent bouts of fever, they were disinclined to work more than was necessary. The effort to plant and reap padi, which occupied two months of every year, taxed their strength. They had no more energy left to earn a better livelihood, or to teach themselves new skills.

The other diseases had a similar effect on the activities of the *kampong* dwellers. Their will to progress, never great because of lack of contact with the outside world, became negligible. Soon they were left behind in all fields. The rest of the world went by, and the tremendous changes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries took place without the rural Malays being even spectators. In the meantime the town Malays benefited somewhat from the changes going on round them. They became better educated, more sophisticated from mixing with other communities and from the changes going on in the world, and they had better health. Newspapers, postal and other communication services, and travel gave them a wider horizon.

The character of the town Malays became more diverse and they found no difficulty in changing with the times. Some intermarried. An important aspect of intra-religious intermarriages worth noting is that, no matter whether the father or the mother was Malay, the offspring invariably considers himself Malay. These intermarriages enriched Malay stock. Of course not all town Malays married non-Malays, but as time went on, town Malays inherited a certain amount of mixed blood as more and more offspring of intermarriages became indistinguishable from the Malays themselves, and married as Malays.

The absence of inter-racial marriages in the rural areas resulted in purebred Malays. This was further aggravated by the habit of family inbreeding. Malays, especially rural Malays, prefer to marry relatives. First cousin marriages were and still are frequent, and the result is the propagation of the poorer characteristics, whether dominant or

recessive, originally found in the brothers or sisters who were parents of the married couple.

Another factor that affected the physiological development of the Malays, again especially in the rural areas, was the habit of marrying early. It was, and still is, common to see married couples of thirteen or fourteen. These early marriages mean reproduction takes place before full maturity of the parents. The effects on both parents and children are well known. Perhaps the most deleterious effect is that the parents are not ready to take care of the children. The parents in fact remain dependent on their own parents who, exulting in their early attainment of the status of grandparents, happily undertake the care of their children's children as well. In this sort of society, enterprise and independence are unknown. The upbringing of children is distorted by the well-known excessive indulgence of grandparents and the incapacity of the parents to take care of the children. The long-term effect on community and race is disastrous.

Malays abhor the state of celibacy. To remain unmarried was and is considered shameful. Everyone must be married at some time or other. The result is that whether a person is fit or unfit for marriage, he or she still marries and reproduces. An idiot or a simpleton is often married off to an old widower, ostensibly to take care of him in his old age. If this is not possible, backward relatives are paired off in marriage. These people survive, reproduce and propagate their species. The cumulative effect of this can be left to imagination.

Although not truly affecting hereditary characteristics, the health of the parents plays a great part in the development of the children. We know how malaria and other diseases affect the physical and mental energy of the rural Malays. When parents, and especially mothers, are continuously afflicted by these diseases, the care of children becomes neglected. As a result, Malay children grow up ill-prepared to face the challenge of living in competition and confrontation with the aggressive immigrant races.<sup>14</sup>

Malaysians can truly count their blessings. Those who should be even more grateful are the Malays. But many are not thankful and hope good fortune will come rolling on its own without any effort. In the 1999 election it was clear that many Malays were not grateful and tried to overthrow the Government that saved the nation and Malays themselves. Those who appreciated the Government's ability are the non-Malays.

In education for example, our problem then was lack of opportunities and affordability to study to the highest levels. Today, opportunities abound and scholarships for Malay children are not hard to come by. But we find that many of our children are not interested in pursuing knowledge.

With so many schools and teachers, more than sufficient budget allocation and equipment, it is sad to see Malay children getting low grades rendering many of them unqualified to enter universities if not for a special quota. Malay children are no less intelligent but without studying hard, even those intelligent ones will not get to be high achievers. What we know is many Malay children are lazy and uninterested in studying. They prefer to loaf around. They get upset if such truths are mentioned. Whether stated or not, the truth cannot be denied.

Today we find more Malay female students accepted into universities compared to males. They go to the same schools but while the male students are not serious in their studies, the female students are more studious. They do not loiter around. They are more responsible. Thank God. If not for female students, the number of Malay students in universities would be reduced by half.

There is no proof that female students are more intelligent than male students. Their abilities are almost equal. But the poor performance of male students has reached a ratio of 20 males to 80 females. If we accept that there are no big differences between male and female in terms of intelligence, then surely if male students strive hard and concentrate on studying, they, too, can achieve excellent results. We are impressed that while the number of male Malay students is few and their results mediocre, they controlled the student bodies. When will male Malay students realise their responsibility, if not towards their race, religion and country? Do they think that society must support them all the time?

Actually the Malays are no less intelligent than the other races. Why we need to have quotas for Malay students in universities is because of our attitude towards seeking knowledge. Non-Malays regard seeking knowledge as noble and society looks up to those who are knowledgeable. With that their parents and teachers pay serious attention towards education of their children and the young. In fact they continue to seek life-long knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

### **An Asian Statesman Speaks Frankly to the West**

Just as his views on the Malays got him into political trouble 30 years ago, Dr Mahathir's views on western democracy and free market capitalism have gained worldwide notoriety.<sup>15</sup> It is thus interesting to note that in February 2004, Amy Chua, a professor of Law from Yale University wrote an article in *The Guardian* expressing views very similar to Dr Mahathir's.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, history will once again vindicate the honest diagnosis of an analytical medical man seeking to help those he deems unhealthy.

America has often enough repeated that it doesn't want to be the policeman of the world. At the same time it keeps insisting that it should be here in the Pacific to keep the peace, to ensure that China and Japan don't impose their will on the rest of us. If I'm asked which one I would choose, I would say it is not right for America to pose as the policeman of the world. In the first place it is not capable of that. In the second place a policeman has to make value judgments, and sometimes they are faulty. For example, we saw massacres carried out in Bosnia. Yet no action was taken. Meanwhile, the slightest move on the part of Iraq brought severe reaction. If you see a policeman who acts differently against different people, then you lose confidence.<sup>17</sup>

The governments of East Asia are far from perfect, but no one can say they did not bring prosperity as well as real, tangible and personally felt benefits to their people. Such was the progress and potential that investors came in droves to get a share of that prosperity. And they all profited hugely from their participation.

What do we see today? These countries and their peoples are suffering. It takes a distorted mind to say that the present situation is better than the prosperity of the past. Yet we are being told that the destruction of our economies will be good for us in the long term. How do we tell the unemployed millions, the bankrupted banks and busted companies that their misfortunes are good for them and their nations? How do you tell a man being devoured by a tiger that he is really helping to preserve a treasured species?

Now we are being told that the only system allowed is that of capitalist free markets, of globalisation. Everyone must accept this system or be considered a heretic and punished accordingly. Not the slightest modification is allowed. That the unfettered, unregulated free market has destroyed

the economies of whole regions and of many countries in the world does not matter. The important thing is that the system is upheld.

There was a time when Christians believed in the Inquisition, in killing Christian non-conformists, Muslims and Jews. It went on for 300 years before it dawned upon the inquisitors that what they were doing was not Christian at all. Many ideologies took decades, even centuries, to be acknowledged as wrong. So the question must be asked: How long before we reject the infallibility of the free-market dogmas? Some are already timidly criticising the International Monetary Fund, the speculators, the capital flows across borders, the right of the self-appointed market forces to discipline elected governments. Can we wait 300 years? The damage is already extensive. It will take decades to restore the economies. Should we fiddle?

Malaysia cannot wait. Malaysia has chosen to become a heretic, a pariah if you like. Our appeal to the world community to regulate and bring order to the market has gone unheeded. If the international community cannot change, then Malaysia must undertake its own reform. We may fail, of course, but we are going to do our damndest to succeed, even if all the forces of the rich and the powerful are aligned against us. God willing, we will succeed.<sup>18</sup>

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