

# Malaysian leaders and test of history

sometimes wonder, if he were to write a book, what Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah would say of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. And, indeed, when Mahathir publishes his, what he would make of Razaleigh.

Not much, I guess, either way. In the books they might write, political leaders usually lay claim to a larger calling and their big place in it, even if how big will be subject to the judgement of history.

In his memoirs, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair skipped about into almost everything that occurred during his time, with not even a hint of an apology for the invasion of Iraq, but with a beautiful chapter on Princess Diana's death and that exquisitely coined phrase, "the People's Princess". Also, there is not a chapter on his *bête noire* Gordon Brown — although there were plenty of snide comments on his former friend turned bitter enemy in a fair bit of the book.

Brown, on the other hand, in his excellent monograph, *Beyond the Crash*, stayed true to his commitment to public duty with his clarion call to overcome the first crisis of globalisation. Blair? He got one mention on Page 23 (the same number as Anwar Ibrahim in relation to a discussion over a dinner in 1998 at which I had been present as Securities Commission chairman).



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BY MUNIR MAJID

Will Mahathir go into greater detail on the battle for Umno with Tengku Razaleigh and the subsequent bringing down of the judiciary in 1988, or on the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 when he single-handedly took on International Monetary Fund monetary orthodoxy and turned the country around? My guess is we will read more about his Herculean success with the latter.

Apart from their big place in history, another instinct political leaders have is to avoid awkward points in it. In her perhaps premature autobiography, *Living History*, Hillary Clinton only accords a couple of paragraphs to the Monica Lewinsky affair — whereas the media had been full of it, and her husband mortally damaged his presidency for having lied through it.

In Malaysian history — with perhaps the exception of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman's diaries, which somehow left me craving for deeper backgrounding — there has not been much good writing from the horse's mouth, as it were, by the political leaders. Tunku Abdul Rahman stands out as the most endearing for not avoiding those awkward points. Why, of course, he did drink and had his good times with fast cars and perhaps even faster women. Didn't everyone?

Never a hypocrite, he took the opportunity to hit back at Mahathir in his column in *The Star* news-

paper. He did not spare policies by Mahathir that he did not agree with, no doubt also influenced by the fourth prime minister's part in bringing him down after the May 1969 racial riots. To his credit, Mahathir tolerated it all, although in truth there was not much else he could do to the Tunku that he did to everybody else. After all, playing the central role in the Tunku's political downfall was enough.

One wonders if and what Tun Musa Hitam would write. The witty and smooth former politician would make interesting reading now that he does not have to posture in a political role. There are three of them in that age group — Musa, Razaleigh and Tun Daim Zainuddin — who have been friends and foes, in love and in war, so to speak. Really, they should all be writing (I understand Daim is doing his version) so that the youths of today would understand the past as they look to the future — something our top leaders harp on often enough. The reading habit nowadays seems to be limited to blogohistory, which is a pernicious thing.

Tun Abdullah Badawi and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim should have a lot of interesting events to relate. Abdullah's time as prime minister, although short (October 2003 to March 2009, the last year

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of which was largely informed by a face-saving succession plan), saw a transformation in the most concentrated fashion in Malaysian political history, second only to the rise of Barisan Nasional and the New Economic Policy, which were however brought on by the violence of 1969. Even if he may be too laidback to relate all this, he could perhaps do it in the style of *Sukarno: An Autobiography. As told to Cindy Adams*, although one would expect him to stop at the telling, which was not what Sukarno allegedly did.

Anwar, when in power, was no different from other Malaysian politicians. However, when out of power, he is something else completely. I would not join the barrage demonising him, particularly the Malay media, which could not have enough of him when he was in power; neither would I consider him God's gift to us all in Malaysia, which, I must say, is a shocking proposition. Yet, he is a fascinating political phenomenon. If he does not tell his own story, I suspect the writing on him would veer from Greek tragedy to Prince of Darkness.

Of course, both Abdullah and Anwar have had things published and have done their writing, of sorts — actually, rather stodgy, promotional stuff on hobby horses like Islam Hadhari and the Asian renaissance — nothing particularly reflective on political events in our country.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is just too busy at the moment. But, with his analytical skills and structured thinking, he is best suited to match Lee Kuan Yew's two volumes of memoirs. Like it or hate it, those volumes are an impressive record of the Singapore story.

I understand preparation of the memoirs was thorough, with endless challenges and criticism of drafts until a final version came through. As you can expect with Lee, it must have been a monumental task to drop even a comma from his original draft. Thus, Lee published a tried and tested version that I place on the top shelf among political memoirs of his generation.

There is not yet the compelling Malaysian story, as told by a top Malaysian political leader. The Tunku's writings are rather whimsical. Second premier Tun Razak, alas, simply did not have enough time. With no disrespect meant, the honourable Tun Hussein Onn would have taken too long and he retired by choice becoming, by a whisker, the shortest-serving prime minister the country ever had. Mahathir, our longest-serving prime minister, would naturally have the most to tell and during his time the most number of big things happened. But, his hectoring style and acutely political predisposition might not make his tome easy and enjoyable reading.

I think Najib is the one best suited to come up with the kind of political memoir that could intellectually match the best in the world and stand the test of history. Even as he is working on so much else, he should work on it, and recognise celebratory biographies for what they are. ■

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