Means and Ends: Mahathir Mohamad’s Mixed Legacy

Reviewed by David Plott

AS MALAYSIA’S longest-ruling prime minister — from 1981 to 2003 — Mahathir Mohamad was never fond of an independent press, especially the Western press, given how prickly he could be toward real or perceived criticism. So it is with some irony that Australian journalist Barry Wain’s biography, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times*, turns out to be a remarkably balanced portrait of a political leader who has, in turns, been vilified by his critics and idolized by his supporters, both at home and abroad. It is also a book that promises to play a pivotal role in defining Mahathir’s legacy, precisely because of the lengths to which Wain has gone to research and candidly assess Mahathir’s spectacular successes and failures.

What gives this biography special appeal is that Wain, a former editor of *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, had access, through numerous interviews and e-mail exchanges, to Mahathir himself; his wife, Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali; two of their seven children, Marina and Mukhriz Mahathir; and a wide variety of political enemies and allies, including Mahathir’s long-time confidante, Daim Zainuddin. Wain also exhaustively researched the complex business empire that grew up over the years around the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) — cementing its decline into corruption and cronyism — as well as the intricate machinations that Mahathir engaged in during his 22 years in power to maintain control over the party and the levers of government.

The result is a portrait of Mahathir that provides ample evidence for both those who argue that he should almost single-handedly be credited with Malaysia’s dramatic transformation from an economic backwater to one of the world’s top 20 exporters and for those who argue that he should be blamed for saddling the country with a political system marked by deeply entrenched corruption, brittle institutions and a legacy of wasteful mega-projects. In short, both Mahathir’s detractors and admirers will find their man here.

Wain’s delicate balancing act — deftly managed in prose that is always lucid and at times eloquent — is successful primarily because he remains focused on what fundamentally motivated Mahathir during his long years in power. He was a determined nationalist and an avid champion of the country’s ethnic Malays, and his unswerving ambition was to drag Malaysia into the ranks of the world’s modern economies, restore national pride in the wake of the country’s colonial era and command respect for Malaysia on the world stage. He was also driven by a desire to ensure that the country’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious society pursued a secular path that maintained social stability.

By articulating in such detail the consistent goals that shaped Mahathir’s behavior at every stage of his political career — and the underlying personal experiences early in his life that gave rise to those goals — Wain subtly builds a framework for assessing Mahathir’s legacy that requires an open-minded reader to distinguish between the means Mahathir employed and the ends he sought.

This is a rather more sophisticated approach than one might imagine, and it has important consequences. It explains, in part, why this exceptional biography comes across as both deeply sympathetic to Mahathir’s vision and scathing in its account of some of the things he did to realize that vision. It also helps explain the extraordinary lengths to which Mahathir went to remain in power and to cripple anyone who might represent a challenge to his authority. He believed that unless he was at the helm, the goals for which he had devoted his entire life would be at risk. Put simply, the ends, for Dr. M, justified the means.

The first of the three parts of this biography are devoted to Mahathir’s early years and his rise to
prime minister at 56. Born into humble beginnings in a poor neighborhood in Alor Setar, the capital of Kedah state, the young Mahathir learned early the stinging effects of colonial Malaya’s dominance by the British and the social hierarchy within local society itself. The discrimination he experienced growing up because of his socio-economic background had a lasting effect on him and made him keenly sensitive to personal snubs of any kind, genuine or perceived (Britain, as well as Malaysia’s royal families, would years later experience the withering effects of Mahathir’s wrath when he introduced the “Buy British Last” campaign and moved to reduce the influence of local royalty on politics). Characteristically, however, he didn’t wallow in his predicament, but instead he worked himself into a position that commanded respect, becoming a practicing physician before eventually entering politics.

From the outset, he stood apart from others in government and politics. “Not only did Dr. Mahathir not smoke or gamble, he strongly disapproved of the lifestyles of senior civil servants and politician who spent their leisure hours in bars and dance halls — and on the golf course, a game played by the first three prime ministers.” But it was his bare-knuckle approach to political combat, and his uncanny sense of how to maneuver through the organizational complexities of party politics, that set him apart from rivals for leadership of UMNO. Not that this was easy. These were treacherous years in Malaysian politics, and there were several occasions during his rise to power when he barely escaped being outflanked and even arrested and jailed — leaving him with a “take no prisoners” approach to political opposition that was to characterize his years in office.

When he finally became prime minister on July
16, 1981, “he gave little indication initially that he would rewrite the political rulebook and become the longest-serving and most controversial premier in the nation’s history,” Wain writes. “Although he swept into office with the intensity of a typhoon, Dr. Mahathir moved cautiously to consolidate his position as leader of both UMNO and Malaysia.”

In the years that followed, which are covered in the second and longest part of this biography, Mahathir was continuously engaged in a Herculean struggle on two fronts simultaneously — to transform Malaysia into a modern, dynamic and secular developing nation and to maintain control of a ruling party that was periodically convulsed by internal divisions and challenges to his leadership. On both fronts, he proved to be brutal in pursuing whatever means it took to achieve his ends.

And on both fronts, he took steps that intertwined business and politics in ways that enabled him to push forward his many modernizing projects and solidify the financial strength of UMNO so that its political patronage would ensure its hold on power. But ultimately, Wain argues, this came at an enormous price in terms of wasted state resources, widespread corruption (although Mahathir himself never personally benefited) and a weakening of vital institutions such as the judiciary and the police.

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Like so much else in this biography, Wain’s effort to assess Mahathir’s legacy, which makes up the third part of the book, is finely balanced. “He put Malaysia on the map, and most Malaysians were pleased about it,” he writes. But he did so at a price. “For while he held Malaysia together for 22 years, the political-administrative system atrophied and decayed under his personalized brand of governance.”

It may well be that if the political reform movement in Malaysia — led by former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whom Mahathir ignominiously sacked in 1998 and jailed — eventually succeeds in breaking UMNO’s hold on power, Malaysia’s political system will develop in such a way as to erase memories of the negative legacies of Mahathir’s years in power. Should that happen, perhaps history will only remember the many positive contributions Mahathir made to Malaysia. That would be the ultimate irony.

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