BOOK REVIEW

CONVERSATIONS WITH MAHATHIR MOHAMAD (GIANTS OF ASIA SERIES)
DR M: OPERATION MALAYSIA BY TOM PLATE, MARSHALL CAVENDISH,
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ABSTRACT

Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad: Doctor M: Operation Malaysia by Tom Plate tells the experience of Mahathir Mohamad as a Malaysian Prime Minister with a superior legacy of his own, especially during his reign of power between 1981 to 2003. The book contains Plate’s detailed retelling of his experience interviewing Mahathir, besides reviewing the answers Mahathir provided on the issues surrounding his leadership. The combination of these two elements is the background that underlies the book’s narration. The contents are constructed by emphasising Plate’s critical perspectives as a former journalist from the West and a current professor at the Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, towards third-world country leaders who are often associated with autocratic and dictatorial leadership and the answers from the main character himself, Mahathir, as a third world country leader who considered himself as purporting accustomed democratic style which was well-tailored to be implemented to Malaysians and the country due to its historical background and at that time – timely needed. Through this book, Mahathir has attested that he was a leader who had established the nation’s industrial infrastructure and brought its name to the attention of the world. However, along the line, as he was too focused and had driven solely by the ambition, he has single-handedly tightened and degraded the country’s institutions with somewhat – oppressive with authoritarian manner. Beyond recall, the book presents readers with fresh insights and viewpoints regarding Mahathir’s leadership, which is often fraught with controversies.
Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister, modernisation, leadership, autocratic.


REVIEW
Plate began the narration by articulating his views on Mahathir Mohamad. He pointed out that Mahathir is still remained one of the flourished Giant Leaders of Asia, although the oppositions of his pact, as well as some of Malaysians themselves, had long withstanding rejected his leadership. He is regarded as a successful leader due to the extraordinary achievements that Malaysia has procured in terms of development and modernisation. Plate claimed such accomplishment rarely occurs across third-world countries, particularly nations that experienced colonialism as fast as Malaysia could be. Nevertheless, Mahathir has been able to develop Malaysia against the odd and tide under his administration.

Plate also highlighted Mahathir’s efforts in driving Malaysia’s development and modernisation, including implementing uncommon yet famous and exceptionally successful initiatives such as the Look East Policy, Malaysian Incorporation Policy, Proton national car project, developing Putrajaya as the country’s modernised administrative centre, Kuala Lumpur Tower, Petronas Twin Towers, Multimedia Super Corridor, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Sepang Formula One Circuit, and PLUS Expressways; which have set a different par for Malaysia’s presence in the Southeast Asian region and even international stage. These landmarks stand as a catalyst for modernisation in Malaysia (Bunnell, 2004; Khairul Azman et al., 2021). However, many people among who were opposing Mahathir, disbelieved in his ability, and have regarded and concurrently criticised nearly all these initiatives. Nevertheless, Plate backed up and purported that Malaysia’s modernisation which enjoyed today has proved the need for such drastic actions to be taken by Mahathir.

Besides recounting Malaysia’s achievements under Mahathir’s leadership, Plate also emphasised the foundation of Mahathir’s leadership by tracing his family background. It consisted of elements such as having parents who attested to the importance of education and Islamic values, the experience of growing up in a village, witnessing the suffering of many Malays, their long-life stories beyond the colonial decades before independence, and experiencing the independence process and the series of national development by previous prime ministers. Indirectly, such emphasis successfully revealed the side of Mahathir’s
leadership considered ultra-Malay, autocratic, and dictatorial. This argument in line as per the analysis of Wain (2009) towards Mahathir. He comes through in subtle explanation, as he criticises Mahathir’s strong nationalistic tendencies but has quick embrace of economic expansion at all costs. Mahathir was deemed as a leader with vision and ambition, a nationalist who while having a strong love for his homeland and its people, as he understands the value of the tough love that his stern teacher-father instilled in him. He was also an industrialist and a futurist but in between the lines he is somehow kind of unreflective on the long-term weights of his ballgames.

Another primary focus of this book is the comprehensive commentary on Mahathir’s leadership by discussing the controversies surrounding him and his involvement on international platforms. This part stands as the strength of this book by offering an in-depth explanation of the untouchable sides of Mahathir’s leadership that is rarely discussed critically in other mediums. Plate commented on Mahathir’s views towards Malaysia’s democracy model, the controversial Internal Security Act implementation, the involvement of the United States and its allies (the Western and Israeli powers) in many global war conflicts, the weakness of the United Nations in dealing with and solving conflicts between disputing countries, the Jews’ tendency to monopolise world affairs through the United States, and the Islamic countries’ incapability to revive and address issues Muslims and Islam face globally although some Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Kuwait are rich as world oil producers.

In facing this issue, Mahathir was not shy away quietly as he made it clear to the Muslim leaders not to deny the fact that Jews control the globe by proxy at a conference of Islamic leaders, with just a few days left in his 22-year term in office. Leaders in the Western showered down rebukes. He also criticised his fellow Muslims for being left behind and would always be the same, branding them as backward people who were weakening by internal strife if they still hobbled by religious superstition and excuses. He made those comments without leaving behind the Muslims in Malaysia as he also dubbed the Malays, who constitute the main ethnic group in the country and for whom he has advocated since becoming power, will also leave behind if they continued to stumble by religions excuses and defenses for not going forward and progressing in life. He claimed that he has continued to treat them like disobedient kids to the very end. The commentary offers a rational explanation and unravels the different sides of Mahathir’s leadership. Plate viewed Mahathir as a leader different from other world leaders and acknowledged him as the Machiavelli of Islam, particularly owing to his proactive role as an Islamic modernisation leader and being decisive in most of his actions (Sohaimi, 2020;
Jeshurun, 1993). Although most of Mahathir’s ideas and actions when governing Malaysia seemed to be against the mainstream ideas in most third-world countries, they were accompanied by well-justified explanations. Mahathir explained to Plate that the misunderstanding towards his leadership was based on the argument that Malaysia’s democracy was not a real democracy. He admitted slight differences exist between implementing democracy under his leadership and other Malaysian prime ministers. Considering the applied democracy as a self-styled and customised democracy, Mahathir stated that the approach was employed and suited based on Malaysia’s history and background as a multi-racial, religious, and cultural country.

This approach was deemed suitable for Malaysia as it can assure the country’s political and economic stability, improve social capital among the people, and particularly facilitate the country’s development and modernisation for the good of the people as a whole at its own pace. It is undeniable that his achievement had made him to be seen as a capstone of Malaysia’s economic achievements and its explosive growth in the 1980s and 1990s, both domestically and internationally. Despite the divisive politics of his administration, which included widespread use of patronage and criticism of human rights, Mahathir has significantly marked a special milestone in Malaysian history. Younger generation who was not around when he was in power would perceive him as a knowledgeable and experienced leader for being able to well-tailored Malaysia development plan although some drawbacks were also intact to it.

In this respect, Plate also highlighted Mahathir’s emphasis on the importance for the public inside and outside a country to know and be aware of the country’s history and background in determining the best administrative system to be applied by the country. Mahathir highlighted the point as he thought the public should know and understand why every country has a different administrative system. According to him, an administrative system applied in one country may not necessarily be suitable and applicable in another country. He further criticised the sense of responsibility felt by some countries with world power status to spread their democratic system to other countries, which is nonsensical. He asserted that history has shown that these actions have brought more harm than good, with a country’s local conditions and background being the main factors of failure.

Mahathir quoted the United States invasion of Iraq as an example in which the initial effort to stop the violence inflicted by Saddam Hussein’s regime not only caused high death tolls among innocent civilians due to the large-scale and unfocused attacks by the United States military but also revoked Iraq’s status as a sovereign country. The situation demonstrates how the United States’ so-called good efforts to democratise Iraq had resulted in the loss of millions
of innocent lives and condemned a sovereign country that could have improved its administrative process through more comprehensive cooperation in line with the practice of inclusive and complete democracy for all. Mahathir has criticised the Western for its cynical and biased implementation of democracy in their handling of the problem arising between them and the Muslim countries. He called out powerful Western nations and their media for being dishonest and hypocritical in their responses to the escalating tensions in the Muslim world, which they instigated. He claimed that the advocacy they had been telling for decades about the desire to bring better democratic practices to these nations was not at all accurate. This is due to the fact that they had actually been carrying out more and worsening was crimes against Muslims in the nations that we impacted.

The discussion of controversial matters, such as those Mahathir argued and Plate reviewed critically, stands as the book’s ultimate strength. The arguments presented in this book have opened a discussion space to review Mahathir’s leadership from another perspective, allowing readers to explore and understand the circumstances and matters that shape Mahathir’s thinking and approach to leading the country. It also provides a stream of varying perspectives for the public to evaluate and judge the appropriateness of Mahathir’s leadership approach in leading Malaysia, particularly in deciding whether the approach is parallel and coincides with democratic practice. Readers can also assess whether his actions will further bring Malaysia forward to be at par with other developed countries or rather bring the country into a realm of underdevelopment and backwardness in certain aspects.

Another strong element of this book is the interview excerpts with Mahathir, which are reviewed together with Plate’s questions. Although this element appears simple and straightforward, it adds value to the overall narrative of Mahathir’s leadership, which the author attempts to convey as the raw data prompts readers to examine Mahathir’s detailed words pertaining to his leadership. It also creates the real picture or context while bringing readers into Mahathir’s mind as he views any particular matter.

Despite its strength in highlighting the in-depth discussions concerning Mahathir’s controversial side, this book contains several moderate flaws. Primarily, Mahathir’s actions to develop and modernise Malaysia were only briefly mentioned by Plate, despite claiming that his leadership is widely known inside and outside the country. His success in spawning various national governance ideas and large-scale projects that were proven beneficial and successful in driving Malaysia’s progress was only briefly highlighted. Therefore, readers are suggested to read further on Mahathir’s initiatives as the Fourth Malaysian Prime Minister to understand his actions in developing and modernising Malaysia from an agricultural to an industrial
country. Nevertheless, the flaw is minor, as the book’s main theme is Mahathir’s controversial leadership and his involvement at the international level.

In conclusion, Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad: Doctor M: Operation Malaysia is a good read, especially for researchers who scrutinise the leadership of Mahathir and leaders of third-world countries, as it provides a critical explanation of a well-known successful third-world country leadership. It further offers a rationale regarding the difference in the democratic approach applied by Mahathir during his first tenure. This book is also suitable for general reading owing to the easy-to-understand language and the appropriate discourse for the public, particularly for those who wish to understand the complexities of Mahathir’s leadership and his customised democratic administrative system.

REFERENCES


