

BOOK REVIEW

DR M: OPERATION MALAYSIA (GIANTS OF ASIA). [REVIEW OF THE BOOK CONVERSATIONS WITH MAHATHIR MOHAMAD, BY T. PLATE]

*Nurul Aimi Razali & Muhamad Helmy Sabtu

Department of Social Science, Centre for General Studies and Co-curricular,
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Johor, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: nurulaimi@uthm.edu.my

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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, especially during his reign of power between 1981 and 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 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 world's attention. However, along the line, as he was too focused and driven solely by ambition, he single-handedly tightened and degraded the country's institutions in a somewhat – oppressive authoritarian manner. Beyond recall, the book presents readers with fresh insights and viewpoints regarding Mahathir's leadership, often fraught with controversies.

Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister, modernisation, leadership, autocratic.

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REVIEW

Plate began the narration by articulating his views on Mahathir Mohamad. He pointed out that Mahathir remains one of the flourishing Giant Leaders of Asia, although the opposition to his pact, as well as some Malaysians themselves, had long 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. Nevertheless, Mahathir has developed Malaysia against the odds and tides 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 catalyse modernisation in Malaysia (Bunnell, 2004; Khairul Azman et al., 2021). However, many people 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 is enjoyed today, has proved the need for Mahathir to take such drastic actions.

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, which was considered ultra-Malay, autocratic, and dictatorial. This argument is in line with the analysis of Wain (2009) towards Mahathir. He comes through in subtle explanation, as he criticises Mahathir's strong nationalistic tendencies but quickly embraces economic expansion at all costs. Mahathir was deemed a leader with vision and ambition, a nationalist who had a strong love for his homeland and its people and understood 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 unreflective on the long-term weights of his ballgames.

Another primary focus of this book is the comprehensive commentary on Mahathir's leadership, which discusses 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 are 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 did 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 West showered down rebukes. He also criticised his fellow Muslims for being left behind. He would always be the same, branding them as backward people who were weakened by internal strife if they were 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 leading ethnic group in the country and for whom he has advocated since becoming a power, will also be left behind if they continue to stumble by religious excuses and defences for not going forward and progressing in life. He claimed that he had treated 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 his decisive 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 facilitate the country's development and modernisation for the good of the people at its own pace. Undeniably, his achievement made him 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. The younger generation, who was not around when he was in power, would perceive him as a knowledgeable and experienced leader for being able to tailor the Malaysia development plan well, although some drawbacks were also intact.

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 that 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 West for its cynical and biased implementation of democracy in its 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 inaccurate. This is because they had been carrying out more and worsening crimes against Muslims in the nations that we impacted.

The book's ultimate strength is the discussion of controversial matters, such as those that Mahathir argued and Plate reviewed critically. 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, 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 about 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. Plate only briefly mentioned Mahathir's actions to develop and modernise Malaysia, 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.

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