

IKMAS WORKING PAPERS
Number 15, July 1998

**POLITICAL CAREERS OF
MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AND ANWAR IBRAHIM**
PARALLEL, INTERSECTING AND CONFLICTING LIVES

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Published in 1998 by
Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa (IKMAS)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 Bangi, Malaysia.

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The paper in this issue is based on an earlier one entitled "Malaysian Leadership, Present and Future: Formative Political Influences on Dato' Seri Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim", presented to the Malaysian Society Colloquium, 22-23 November 1997. The author wishes to thank an anonymous IKMAS reader for his useful comments.

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Abstract

There is no shortage of academic and media works on Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Missing from these accounts, however, is a systematic attempt to examine their career paths, including key influences that shaped their political thinking and fortunes. Political theory is only of limited help here: works on political socialisation identify a number of factors, particularly in childhood and youth, that mould political identity, but in the end it is up to the writer to interpret how particular circumstances or events have influenced political behaviour. In this writer's view, the career paths of Mahathir and Anwar have ultimately pushed them in very similar directions. While there have been conflicts and tensions between them, at crucial times over three decades they have co-operated together. These factor may ultimately help in what promises to be a difficult succession process, and should ensure a broad continuity of government policy.

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**THE POLITICAL CAREERS OF
MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AND ANWAR IBRAHIM
PARALLEL, INTERSECTING AND CONFLICTING LIVES**

1.0 Malaysia Under Dr. Mahathir

WHATEVER reassessments of Asian governments arise out of the current economic turmoil, Dr Mahathir's place in history is assured. In seventeen years as prime minister he has transformed Malaysia. Until the economic crisis began in 1997, he presided over an economy that grew at almost breakneck speed – in excess of 8 percent for the preceding nine years. As manufactured goods grew from around 30 percent to over 70 percent of exports Malaysia became an economic powerhouse, the world's 17th largest exporter. It even became an exporter of capital, investing some RM7 billion in 1996 alone in regions as diverse as Southeast Asia, China, South Africa and Eastern Europe. In a bid to achieve the status of an industrial economy by 2020, it sought the most modern technology available, particularly for the futuristic Multimedia Super Corridor.

To achieve such results Malaysia followed an East Asian-style economic formula pioneered by Japan, emphasising the promotion of industrial exports and the development of heavy industry. State institutions were directly involved in some sectors, though a policy of privatisation led to a steady diminution of their direct role. The government worked closely with the private sector, including foreign investors. Partnership between the state, domestic and foreign private sectors, and labour (with labour a very distant third) was proudly referred to as

Malaysia Inc. or "smart partnerships", and Malaysia offered its expertise on such co-operation to the world.

Growth benefited all communities. Per capita GNP went from under US\$2,000 in 1980 to around \$5,000 in 1997. Absolute poverty declined to less than 15% of the population. The gap between rich and poor, and between racial groups, narrowed – until around 1990, when both began to grow. A major success was the creation of a new Malay entrepreneurial class able to compete with Chinese counterparts. This did not solve all Malay economic problems, and Malay businessmen were often dependent on the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) or government, but by the end of the 1980s the accepted truism that Chinese controlled the economy no longer applied. Together with these developments the movement of Malays from rural areas to the cities, and the emergence of a Malay middle class, proceeded apace.

Economic success, and Mahathir's own high profile, combined to make Malaysia a significant international player. It became a major actor in fora such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and G-15. Mahathir constantly gained attention for outspoken criticisms of the international media and countries such as the United States, Britain, and Australia – accusing them of discriminating against the third world economically and patronising them on issues such as human rights and democracy. On occasions he invoked limited economic sanctions against Britain and Australia. There was much substance in Mahathir's criticisms, though at times this was obscured by rhetorical extravagance – something that counted against him in the West, but seldom affected his standing in the third world.

At home Mahathir consolidated his own political position over the years. Although he almost lost power in 1987, he quickly regained the initiative and became the ultimate arbiter on all key political issues. He has not sought or been

able to ride roughshod over opposition, but has not hesitated to bring to bear the full range of state and party sanctions against political opponents when necessary. He entrenched Malay political dominance, and UMNO's dominance within the ruling National Front coalition, but stripped the residual powers of traditional Malay rulers. At the beginning of his rule policies in relation to issues such as the Malay language and Islam gave Malaysia a more distinct Malay cultural identity. Nonetheless Mahathir always stressed the importance of a moderate approach to Islam, and took tough action against extremists. And in a bid to accelerate economic growth by increasing English literacy, in recent years he reduced the position of Malay in schools and universities. In his Vision 2020, Mahathir looks forward eventually to breaking down all communal barriers, with his proposal for a *bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race).

How are we to account for such policies? And will Mahathir's Malaysia will be carried forward by his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim? – barring any catastrophe his succession now appears certain, although the precise date is not. There can be no simple answers to such questions, but this paper is a partial attempt to address them by looking at the political careers of both leaders, including formative political influences at various stages of their lives. It concludes with some tentative comments on how such influences, including relations between Mahathir and Anwar hitherto, may affect the prospects for a smooth succession.

The literature on political socialisation provides some guidelines for analysis. It stresses the importance of early childhood experience in the family and school, along with more formal induction into political activities during adolescence. Basic political orientations and views are usually established by adulthood, and any changes thereafter come from either major changes in areas including the general political environment (such as a colony gaining independence), occupation, or participation in actual political events (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969). The following paper addresses these issues, though recognising

that the framework provides only broad parameters, and in the end it is up to the writer to assess how particular circumstances or events influence political behaviour.

2.0 Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

BORN around the middle of 1925¹ the youngest son of a provincial headmaster of Indian Muslim origin, Mahathir had a comfortable though not salubrious start in life. His father was the first headmaster of a secondary school in Alor Star, Kedah state, the English-medium Sultan Abdul Hamid College. His mother was a Malay with links to state royalty, but too distant to give Mahathir any entree into aristocratic circles.

Mohamad Iskander was, by all accounts, a disciplinarian, who ensured that his son made the most of his educational opportunities. Mahathir thrived on such a regime. He was a serious student who had little interest in sport, was a vociferous reader, and in his final year edited the school magazine. He graduated with excellent results in December 1946.²

Mahathir was brought up in a normal Malay environment. He attended a Malay-medium primary school, and after school attended Koran-reading classes. In the late 1940s he wrote newspaper articles that revealed a deep knowledge of Malay culture and society. His later sharp criticisms of Malay society were those of an insider, not an outsider. Nonetheless from secondary school onwards

¹ Mahathir's birth was registered on 15 December 1925, but he recently noted that his father was some six months late. *Straits Times*, 8 September, 1997.

² The Cambridge School Certificate graded papers as Pass, Credit or Very Good. Mahathir received Very Good for History of the British Empire, Geography and Elementary Mathematics, and Credits for English Literature, Malay, Art and Hygiene and Physiology. The certificate is reproduced in Institut Kemajuan Wanita Malaysia, *Mahathir: Epitome of a Statesman*, Kuala Lumpur, 1995.

Mahathir was surrounded by non-Malays, and he established many lasting friendships with them.

Before Mahathir had completed his schooling, two traumatic events had occurred. The first was World War II. He experienced the Japanese occupation as an occasion that exposed the "backwardness and incompetence" of the Malays. Japanese retrenchment of government employees forced many Malays out of work (including his own brothers), and few found employment elsewhere. Malays realised, he argued, that "it was only the preferential policy of the government which prevented them from becoming the most under-privileged class in Malaya – their own country" (Mahathir 1995, p.83). Politicised by these events, in 1945 he joined three Kedah Malay political organisations. The most radical of these, Saberkas, demanded nationalisation of major industries and the establishment as soon as possible of an independent, democratic and socialist Malayan state.

To earn a living at this time, Mahathir was forced to engage in petty trading. While fellow Malay hawkers struggled to make ends meet, he did relatively well, "eventually selling his coffee stall for a small profit and replacing it with a more lucrative business selling bananas." (Adshead 1989, p.31). The experience left him with an interest in business for the rest of his life.

Despite membership of Saberkas, Mahathir initially looked forward to the return of the British to give Malays "another chance to make good use of their privileges instead of squandering them" (Mahathir 1995, p.83). His school magazine editorial in December 1945 welcomed the fact that World War II had been won by the "Powers of Right and Justice" (IKWM 1995, p.5).

Like many Malays, Mahathir's attitude towards Britain changed profoundly when the colonial power announced plans for a Malayan Union in early 1946. Central to the Union were the removal of the special position of the Malays, and

extending citizenship freely to all races. Mahathir took part in the mass protests that erupted throughout the country, pasting anti-British posters and addressing public rallies to demand changes. He became a foundation member of UMNO when the various anti-Malayan Union groups came together in May 1946.

By this time Mahathir had determined on a political career. He hoped to prepare for this by studying law in England (Adshead, 1989, p.34), but was offered medicine in Singapore instead.³

2.1 *Singapore Years*

IN 1947, Mahathir moved from the fringes of empire to the commercial centre of colonial Malaya, a world apart. How Singapore looked to Mahathir can be seen in observations penned in 1950: "the Malays, once the owners and rulers are to be found only in the poorer quarters living in dilapidated attap and plank huts, sometimes only a stone's throw from the political residences of Chinese millionaires. The few Malays in the city live in the servant's quarters of Chinese and European houses. Malay white-collar workers, who constitute the largest portion of the powerful Malay middle class in the Federation, are conspicuous by their absence in Singapore" (Mahathir 1995, pp.85-6). The extent of Malay backwardness would also have been brought home to Mahathir by their under-representation at his college (the precursor to the University of Malaya), where only 70 of 700 students were Malay. In the face of strong opposition, Mahathir argued for retention of a 75 per cent quota in favour of Malays for government scholarships to the college (Mahathir 1995, p.70).

³ By common repute Mahathir did not get a scholarship to London because his social standing was not high enough in the eyes of colonial rulers. However Stockwell, who interviewed Mahathir on this issue, writes that a senior Malay bureaucrat (coincidentally from Kedah) allocated federal scholarships. Stockwell, A J, British Policy and Malay Politics During the Malayan Union Experiment 1942-1948, MBRAS, Kuala Lumpur, 1979, p. 83, footnote 47.

This is not to say that Mahathir found all his experiences in Singapore unpleasant. He established a strong bond with students of his year, and has seldom missed a biennial meeting of his class. He became president of the college Islamic Society, and chief editor of the student newspaper.

During his time in Singapore Mahathir also became a regular commentator on Malay society and politics for the English language *Straits Times*. The articles, recently brought together in a book (Mahathir 1995), are written in a direct, didactic style, and provide many revealing insights; they are a remarkable accomplishment for a full-time student in a demanding discipline. Many are directed at suggesting practical solutions to problems of Malay economic backwardness. His starting point is that Malays lack the financial skills of others, particularly the Chinese, and that they therefore needed extra government assistance until able to compete – meaning particularly continuation of the special position Malays had hitherto enjoyed under the British. He also sees Malays as having contributed to their own problems, by their lethargic and fatalistic attitudes. In one case he describes Malays as having a "low average intelligence quotient" – possibly a forerunner of controversial claims of "hereditary" problems made in his *Malay Dilemma* (Mahathir 1970), which he later retracted.

A number of additional themes run through these early writings. He is critical of both the Malay aristocracy, seen as less than supportive of UMNO struggles, and the colonial administration. He is often forthright in advocating women's rights including, well ahead of his time, opportunities for women's education and employment (He later married a fellow medical student). In one article he called for the reintroduction of Malay as an official language, alongside English.⁴

⁴ For an insightful account of the Singapore years see also Khoo Boo Teik 1995, pp. 81-88.

2.2 *Building a Business and Political Base*

AFTER graduating in 1953, Mahathir completed his internship in Penang, then served in a number of Kedah hospitals. Chaffing under the bureaucratic constraints of government service, in 1957 he opened his own clinic in Alor Star. At the same time he became involved in other business ventures, in areas such as transportation, quarrying and housing projects, with Malay and Chinese business partners. He cut a dashing figure in those days driving a Pontiac, the biggest car in town – perhaps a harbinger of big plans he was later to expound for Malaysia as a whole.

In the early 1960s, Mahathir proposed the privatisation of Alor Star's sewerage transportation, an event that may well have influenced later ambitious schemes of privatisation for the country at large. Council sewerage arrangements at that time were quite unsatisfactory – irregular collection and disposal, and precedence given to shops and houses providing 'tips'. Initially privatisation was strongly opposed by employees, but eventually the scheme was accepted and the earlier problems ended.

Mahathir was a caring doctor, one who did not enforce payment on poorer patients. He was also involved in welfare and public health activities. As President of the Kedah Tuberculosis Society he visited Indian workers on rubber plantations to treat and give advice to tuberculosis sufferers (Zainuddin 1994, p.7).

Mahathir resumed political activities in UMNO after returning to Kedah, and in 1955 became a member at the influential state level. By 1959 he had become head of Kedah UMNO, and was expected to stand in federal elections that year. Instead, a minor party difference led him to stand aside. Mahathir had made proposals on the method of selecting candidates that were opposed by some party members in Kedah, who petitioned UMNO president Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Learning of the Tunku's displeasure, Mahathir withdrew his proposals and announced he would not be a candidate (Zainuddin 1994, p.15).

While relations between the two sons of Kedah had been strained for some time, this was their first major conflict. It reflected both personality and policy differences. The Tunku was an aristocrat, enjoyed a westernised life style that included membership of clubs, drinking alcohol and playing golf, and gave high priority to following bureaucratic protocol – all of which were inimical to Mahathir. On policy matters Mahathir believed the Tunku's laissez faire approach to communal relations endangered the future for Malays, and objected to the Tunku's pro-British views. Rumours at the time (incorrectly) attributed Mahathir's non-candidature to his opposition to Malaya's defence alliance with Britain.

The incident revealed aspects of Mahathir's political style that were to come to the fore on later occasions – a deep sensitivity to the actions of others and, on occasions, an "all or nothing" response to political problems.

2.3 First Parliamentary Term

MAHATHIR finally stood for election in a Kedah constituency in 1964. Approaching forty – a veteran by Malaysian political standards – he immediately grabbed the political limelight. He established a reputation as an articulate parliamentarian, and became UMNO's main spokesman in the party's conflict with Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew. Lee dubbed Mahathir an 'ultra' for his defence of Malay interests, a term that stuck – much to Mahathir's annoyance. At the same time he also became the leading party spokesman against UMNO's main rival, Parti Islam (PAS), the other extreme of the Malaysian political continuum. In 1964 he became chairman of the Afro Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, representing his country overseas in a bid to weaken international support for Indonesia, then engaged in 'confrontation' of Malaysia. This may have

been his first exposure to countries outside Malaysia and Singapore, but he followed this up with several other visits in different parliamentary capacities.

Mahathir's activities were well received by party members, and in 1965 he was elected to the UMNO supreme council. He identified with a younger group that began to develop different views from those of party leaders. These were expressed through party publications, and for around eighteen months in a paper of their own, *Pemerhati*, but their writings were eventually stopped by the UMNO leadership (Funston 1980, pp.179-184). Among the policies advocated by this group were:

- greater understanding of the economic handicaps faced by Malays as a community. Unfettered private enterprise would not allow Malay entrepreneurs to get to first base, so more government assistance was necessary;
- closer identification with Afro-Asian developing countries, and an end to the apron-strings' relationship with Britain. The group opposed basing foreign troops in Malaysia;
- combating feudal attitudes, including uncritical acceptance of leadership and reliance on intervention of superiors rather than self-help (Feudal-minded politicians and bureaucrats were singled out, but support for the Malay rulers was notably tepid.);
- modification of Western-style democracy, seen as divisive and ineffective in communally-divided Malaysia (The alternative was ill-defined, but included an elitist belief that politics was best left to people such as themselves able to comprehend Malaysia's problems and come up with appropriate answers);
- a more active UMNO, transforming it into a party that would lead government rather than leaving all key decisions to the Tunku.

2.4 *Political Wilderness*

MAHATHIR'S high profile was rewarded by regular re-election to the supreme council, but exacted a high price in the 1969 election. He was caught up in an anti-UMNO groundswell, and a small number of Chinese electors tipped the balance to give his PAS rival a narrow victory.

Following the post election outbreak of racial violence, Mahathir wrote an emotional letter to the Tunku, alleging that his pro-Chinese policies were responsible for the May 13 tragedy and had made him hated by Malays. The letter was widely distributed before it was banned. Mahathir received limited support from within UMNO – notably from Datuk Musa Hitam – but much stronger support from Malay academics and students. The later, under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, staged repeated demonstrations against the Tunku. They continued to provide a platform for Mahathir to expound his views after he was expelled from the supreme council on 12 July then the party on 26 September. The international media reported Mahathir's role in these events in highly unflattering terms, an experience he has never forgotten.

Out of parliament and out of the party, Mahathir returned to his clinic and other businesses, and more particularly turned to writing. The *Malay Dilemma* came out in early 1970. It was soon banned, and remained so until Mahathir became prime minister in 1981, but with the book available in Singapore and the author a prominent speaker on the Malaysian lecture circuit, its views became well known. The book elaborated many of the arguments Mahathir had already developed about the problems of Malay backwardness and the importance of greater government assistance to overcome these. Some parts were directly influential in shaping the New Economic Policy (NEP) – for instance, his argument that equality required that "each race is represented in every strata of society, in every field of work, in proportion more or less to their percentage of the population" (Mahathir 1970, p.79) was reflected in the NEP objective of restructuring society so that identification of race with particular forms of economic activity would eventually be eliminated. A particularly controversial argument was that Malays should be accepted as the "definitive race" in the country. What this meant, in essence, was that non-Malays should learn Malay, and go through a common Malay-medium educational program – developments

that were in fact implemented from 1969. One other argument to raise eyebrows was the claim that Malays were disadvantaged by hereditary factors (in-breeding), an argument Mahathir has distanced himself from in recent years.

Two other publications that came out a few years later were probably substantially written during this period. In 1974, Mahathir published *Panduan Peniaga Kecil*, later translated and published in English as *Guide For Small Businessmen* (Mahathir 1985), a slim volume providing basic information for budding entrepreneurs. Its overall concern was to advise Malays how to get started in business, and in particular how to succeed against Chinese competition.

In 1976, Mahathir published *Menghadapi Cabaran*, later issued as *The Challenge* (Mahathir 1986). His purpose in publishing the volume was to counter Muslims who saw their religion either as opposed to modernity, or the equivalent of socialism. It demonstrates very clearly that Islam – as well as Malay nationalism – is an important part of Mahathir's political make-up. The book is a reflective work, drawing extensively on Islamic texts and history, which emphasises the importance of spiritual values, education, discipline, and organisation. It is critical of corruption, destructive opposition to governments from pressure groups, and allegedly decadent Western ways – resistance to hard work, untidiness, nudity and homosexuality.

Mahathir has continued to be a prolific writer. It is, of course, impossible for him to write all the speeches he delivers, but in a great number of these his forceful, didactic style is readily recognisable. His speeches for recent years are now available on the Internet, along with a detailed work entitled *The Malaysian System of Government*.

2.5 *Meteoric Rise*

AFTER the Tunku's retirement in September 1970, UMNO leaders slowly became more amenable to Mahathir's return. Initial attempts failed because of his unwillingness to apologise for his actions, or be seen as a supplicant, but with the support of controversial Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Harun Idris, he was eventually readmitted on 7 March 1972. His political advance thereafter can appropriately be described as meteoric.

In June 1972, Mahathir was re-elected to the UMNO supreme council with the highest number of votes, though he failed in a simultaneous bid for the vice presidency. He was re-appointed to the chair of the Higher Education Council (he had been the first chair in 1968). The following year he re-entered parliament, appointed by Kedah state as a senator, and became chairperson of Food Industries of Malaysia, a semi government agency concerned largely with food processing. In 1974 he was again elected to parliament (unopposed) and immediately appointed Education Minister, by-passing the normal progression from a deputy position to full minister. The Education portfolio gave ministers an opportunity to entrench support among school teachers, then the most important group in UMNO, and was recognised as a potential stepping stone to higher office.

Mahathir's election to the office of UMNO Vice President in June 1975, edging out his former benefactor, Datuk Harun, placed him within reach of the top two positions in the party and country. With Tun Razak's untimely death in office in January 1976, his successor, Datuk Hussein Onn, was left with the task of choosing a deputy from among the three elected Vice Presidents. After six week's deliberation Hussein named Mahathir to the post – a surprising choice, since he was in party terms the most junior of the three, had received the least votes, and was not particularly close to the prime minister. Mahathir has speculated that

Hussein may have acted on Tun Razak's advice; another theory is that Datuk Musa was influential.⁵

After appointment as Deputy Prime Minister Mahathir maintained the Education portfolio for another two years. His time in this ministry is best remembered for the tough stand he took against student and academic protest, particularly following student demonstrations in December 1974, supporting earlier peasant hunger marches. Mahathir endorsed the police crack-down on demonstrators, and has claimed responsibility for the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim under the ISA at this time.⁶ He forced scholarship holders to sign guarantees that they would not become involved in politics, and in April 1975 amended the Universities Act to give the government extensive disciplinary powers over staff and students who were politically active. Other organisations, such as Anwar's Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or ABIM), also encountered increased obstacles to their political activities, and saw Mahathir as the person behind these.

At the beginning of 1978, Mahathir was switched to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, presumably to gain experience in an economic ministry before his expected move to the prime ministership. It seems to have been about this time that Mahathir's commitment to industrialisation gained coherence, arising both out of recognition that more money was made in the production of manufactured goods than the mere sale of commodities, and the deterioration of commodity prices in the 1970s and early 1980s (Khoo 1995, pp.114-124). Towards this end he established the Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia (Hicom) in 1980. The

⁵ Mahathir was a surprised as anyone by his appointment. His views on the role of Tun Razak are reported in New Straits Times, 21 August, 1997. The possibility that Hussein acted on the advice of his Johor colleague – later Deputy Prime Minister – Datuk Musa Hitam, is discussed in A. Ghani Ismail, Razaleigh Lawan Musa. Pusingan Kedua, Taiping, 1983, pp.3-4.

⁶ Straits Times, 24 May, 1997.

portfolio also provided greater opportunities for travel, which Mahathir did frequently, often at the head of trade missions.

Mahathir's elevation to the top position proceeded smoothly, though he had first to survive an intense power struggle within UMNO that saw several senior members arrested under the ISA for alleged communist links. Mahathir was among those who feared arrest, and indeed his political secretary was detained only three days before he became prime minister. One of his first actions as prime minister was to free 21 of those arrested under the ISA. These events probably reinforced Mahathir's awareness of the importance of the Home Affairs portfolio, which through the Police Special Branch is largely in charge of implementing the ISA; his deputy Datuk Musa held the position during his time in office, but Mahathir has retained it since February 1986.

2.6 *At the Top*

MAJOR features of Mahathir's administration were outlined at the beginning of the paper. This section seeks only to fill in some of the defining developments in a little more detail.

On the economic front, Mahathir soon underlined his commitment to building an industrialised Malaysia along Japanese and South Korean lines. He expanded joint ventures between Hicom and foreign multinationals, to establish steel, cement and motor-cycle engine factories, and most famously the national car (Proton). In other respects he continued with the public sector-led economic restructuring mandated by the NEP, though with a promise to eliminate bureaucratic inefficiencies and get the job done. Nonetheless, as Khoo has noted, Mahathir's attitude towards an expanding state was ambiguous. In areas such as heavy industry he saw no alternative. But he had long been convinced that publicly owned enterprises were inefficient. In 1983, he announced policies of

"privatisation" and "Malaysia Incorporated" to allow for a greater role of the private sector (Khoo 1995, pp.130-132).

Government policies came under further review in 1985, as the public sector ran up large debts and a global slow-down led to negative growth. Mahathir, working closely with Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, modified policies by reducing direct government assistance to Malays, suspending some Malay economic privileges, speeding up privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation (though still moving cautiously in sectors such as finance and the motor industry), and providing additional incentives for foreign and domestic private investors. The changes ushered in an unprecedented period of rapid economic growth benefiting all communal groups. After the NEP ended in 1990 a less communal National Development Policy was introduced, and reinforced by the 2020 Vision of an advanced industrial society, in which all would participate as *bangsa Malaysia*.

The regional economic crisis has posed new economic challenges. Analysts of Mahathir's response to this have focused on his outspoken attacks on financial speculators (particularly George Soros) and currency trading. Domestically he has been criticised for attempts to deny international market forces by banning short-selling on the stock market (withdrawn after one week) and threats to establish a RM60 billion fund for share purchases (never implemented), along with various measures to assist Malaysia's troubled corporate sector, often labelled 'bailouts'. In short, Mahathir has been widely seen as persisting with aspects of Malaysia Inc. which ran counter to economic rationality. While several aspects of his handling of the economic crisis are indeed controversial, this is an oversimplification. Mahathir has largely accepted IMF prescriptions, postponing mega projects, cutting government expenditure, strengthening corporate governance, strengthening the finance sector by mergers, and continuing policies

of cautious liberalisation. At the time of writing Mahathir's Malaysia is being reformed, though not fundamentally altered.

Politically, Mahathir enjoyed an early honeymoon, reflected in a strong mandate received at the 1982 election. Thereafter he encountered numerous problems, including the economic downturn, a series of financial scandals, a constitutional crisis over his attempt to reduce the powers of the sultans, a dispute with the judiciary, rising Islamic extremism, and problems within UMNO after the resignation of his deputy, Datuk Musa, in February 1986. Mahathir demonstrated a remarkable stamina in facing these problems, a persistence in pursuit of key objectives, and an ability to bounce back at times when he appeared most vulnerable. Forced to accept a compromise in his battle with the sultans in 1983, Mahathir resumed his campaign in the 1990s, and removed all the rulers' residual political powers in 1993. He gained another strong mandate in the 1986 election, but in April 1987 faced a challenge to his leadership of UMNO from Datuk Musa and former Finance and Trade Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. With around 1500 delegates in attendance Mahathir defeated Razaleigh by only 43 votes, while Mahathir's team mate Ghafar Baba won over Musa by 40 votes. One of Mahathir's strongest supporters in this contest was Anwar Ibrahim.

The year 1987 is generally seen as a turning point towards a more authoritarian government. Mahathir himself declared that he had tried to be liberal but this had failed. He passed a number of laws to tighten restrictions on political activity, and when communal tensions heightened late in 1987 arrested 119 under the ISA, including many political opponents in the opposition and within UMNO. He then moved to strengthen his position in UMNO, taking advantage of an extraordinary court decision in February 1988 declaring the party illegal. The opposition regrouped as Semangat 46, but were out-manoeuvred by another strong UMNO performance in the 1990 elections. For the 1996 party assembly, Mahathir was behind party decisions to re-appoint the top two party positions without

contest, and to ban campaigning for party posts in the preceding months. This strengthened his party position, while his national leadership had been enhanced by the government's largest ever election win in 1995. In the past twelve months Mahathir's position has inevitably been weakened by the economic crisis and his handling of it, but his continuing political strength was demonstrated in the overwhelming expressions of support extended to him at the June 1998 UMNO general assembly.

Despite a range of restrictions on political activities, there are limits to Mahathir's powers. Crouch, for instance, describes the Mahathir administration as "repressive-responsive" – noting on the responsive side the willingness of government parties to respond to public wishes at election time to maximise the party vote (Crouch 1996). There are other examples. Democracy remains alive within UMNO, notwithstanding the restrictions noted: its leaders could not retain their positions without responding to members needs. The scope of political comment is widening as new newspapers are opened up, and new TV programs deal openly and critically with current political issues. And while Mahathir is often critical of pressure groups, NGOs continue to play an important role, encouraged by Anwar's repeated calls for strengthening civil society.

In foreign policy, Mahathir soon came into conflict with the former colonial power. Malaysian government attempts to support the international tin market flopped spectacularly when Britain changed the rules governing tin marketing. At the same time the government's purchase of Guthries, a major British company in Malaysia, led the London stock exchange to change its rules to prevent such take-overs in the future, and complaints of "backdoor nationalisation" that were deeply resented by Mahathir. He responded with a Buy British Last and Look East campaigns, eventually forcing Britain to act as supplicant before relations could be normalised.

Mahathir launched several more anti-Western campaigns, often directed at the Western media, in the years thereafter. His objective was that of respect based on equality – "*berdiri sama tinggi, duduk sama rendah*" (literally, standing tall together, sitting low together), to use an oft-repeated Mahathir phrase. The issues on which Malaysia responded with most passion were those where its leaders felt that such respect had not been accorded – media programs in Australia seen as patronising towards Malaysia, US Secretary of State Baker's reportedly derisory comments on Mahathir's traditional Malay dress, and Australian Prime Minister Keating's reference to Mahathir as 'recalcitrant', to cite just a few examples.

Such actions generally strengthened Malaysia's standing in the third world, where much of its diplomatic activity was focused, but caused Malaysia to be regarded with suspicion or resentment in the West. Mahathir nonetheless generally succeeded in preventing his disputes impacting adversely on foreign investment, an issue he accorded high priority, until the 1997 regional economic denouement. And he kept a close eye on the realities of power – supporting a continuing over-the-horizon regional presence for the US, increasing bilateral defence with the US, and expanding the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

3.0 Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim

ANWAR was born on 10 August 1947, near Butterworth, Penang. His father was then a hospital orderly, and Anwar's first home lacked basic amenities such as running water and electricity. Family fortunes improved when Ibrahim Abdul Rahman became an UMNO parliamentarian in 1959, rising to become parliamentary secretary for Health after re-election in 1964. Anwar's mother was also an active party member, heading the women's section of the local division from 1961-67.

3.2 *After Graduation – Continuing the Struggle*

ANWAR'S activities attracted the attention of political leaders, including Tun Razak, who attempted to coax him into UMNO after he finished university in 1971. Others encouraged him to join the bureaucracy – a well-paid and prestigious occupation eagerly sought by most of his counterparts – and he later received lucrative offers from international organisations. He chose, instead, to open a school – Akademi Yayasan Anda – under ABIM auspices, for Malay-medium "drop outs" from the government system. There he stayed as principle and board chairman, on a monthly subsistence salary of RM350, until he joined the government in 1982 (Morais 1983, p.4).

As Anwar and others approached the end of their studies they remained keen to play a political role without joining any of the established parties. At Anwar's instigation ABIM was formed in August 1971.⁷ The following year Anwar became its secretary-general, then in 1974 its president, a position he held for eight years. So influential was his role that a contemporary political joke claimed ABIM stood for **Anwar Bin IbrahiM**

Anwar's career also took an additional course after graduation when he was elected head of the Malaysian Youth Council (MYC) – a co-ordinating body for all youth groups which had hitherto (from the late 1950s) been headed by a senior UMNO member. This provided an opportunity for him to work with non-Malays as well as Malays, which he did successfully. As MYC head he represented Malaysia at a UN youth seminar in 1972, at Tun Razak's request, and remained the organisation's leader until after his release from detention under the ISA in 1978.

⁷ Several references cite 1972 as the year of ABIM's formation. This in fact marks the year it was officially recognised as a society (on 17 August).

3.3 *The ABIM Years*

STILL, Anwar's main activities in the 1970s centred on ABIM. From the 153 people who attended its inaugural meeting ABIM expanded rapidly to around 35,000 in 86 branches by the end of the decade – riding the wave of Islamic revivalism known as the *dakwah* phenomenon. It branched out into a broad range of activities, including publishing the monthly Malay-medium *Risalah* (and also an English-medium journal, for a time), publishing and marketing Islamic books, maintaining a library, organising leadership training courses and Islamic study groups, and running an economic co-operative. Above all it organised numerous talks, forums and seminars on Islamic affairs, supplemented by direct action when necessary. ABIM now refers to this period as its ‘confrontational’ phase.

ABIM's central message in the 1970s – and still today – was the importance of Islam as *deen*, a self-sufficient way of life that holds the key to all of man's needs. This made ABIM the most directly political of all the *dakwah* groups, reflected particularly in calls for the introduction of Islamic legal, educational and economic systems, and political reforms that would end corruption and guarantee basic political freedoms.

The details of what an Islamic legal system would look like were never spelt out in detail. Some of the social ills that ABIM focused on which could presumably have been legislated against included trading in alcoholic beverages, taking drugs, gambling, beauty contests and prostitution. Non-Muslims would, however, be free to implement their own religious laws, and, according to Anwar, some aspects of Muslim private law such as those relating to *khalwat* (an unmarried couple in close proximity) and *zina* (adultery) would only be applied with non-Muslim consent. Indeed, Anwar's view, at the time was that an Islamic

legal system remained some way off: "People should be made to understand what Islam is; there's no point harping on Islamic government, Islamic law when people have no opportunity to understand"⁸

In practice, ABIM gave much less priority to legal issues than it did to Islam's commitment to justice (*keadilan*), particularly in the economic and political spheres. Malay poverty remained a major focus of ABIM's attention. In addition, it argued that the Malaysian economy benefited only a small group of local and foreign capitalists at the expense of the rest of the population. Islam offered a middle path between this and an equally unacceptable socialism. Among the specific changes recommended were establishing non-exploitative credit institutions, and land reform. Politically, ABIM focused on the issues of corruption and political freedom. It led complaints against Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Harun, which eventually led to Harun's trial and conviction on several corruption charges. And it denounced restrictions on political activities for organisations such as itself – an issue that gained added urgency after Anwar's arrest in December 1974.

Anwar's work at Yayasan Anda also reveals the importance ABIM accorded education. While it sought to impart a spiritual dimension, its main concern was that Muslims equip themselves with the types of knowledge necessary to adapt to the requirements of modern society.

The other major strand in ABIM ideology was its commitment to Muslim internationalism. At least 20 percent of the monthly journal focused on such issues, often in relation to the problems of Islam minorities. On occasions ABIM authors also vented their opposition to allegedly anti-Muslim organisations such as Zionists and Freemasons.

⁸ *Asiaweek*, 24 August, 1979, pp. 30-31.

Anwar's arrest in December 1974 followed mass student demonstrations held in support of Malay peasants suffering acute economic hardship in Kedah. The government case against him was based on alleged anti-government activities conducted since 1969, and made only a general reference to background involvement in the 1974 event (Kamarazaman 1994, pp.169-171). Anwar rejected all the allegations, and was freed unconditionally twenty-two months later.

Anwar's period in detention did nothing to make him reassess his course. He led prayers and Islamic study classes with inmates, continued to fulfil duties as head of ABIM and the MYC, and enrolled for a post-graduate degree with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Kamarazaman 1994; Syed Husin Ali 1996).

When released Anwar took up from where he had left off. In March 1978, he spoke at a PAS rally in Kelantan against the federal imposition of emergency law in that state. With other ABIM leaders leaving about this time to join PAS, many expected Anwar might follow. His radical image was strengthened by an early visit to Iran after Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution, and strong opposition to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, ABIM did work with the government in a number of areas, including seminars and camps for Muslims in the Asia-Pacific. And Anwar responded to claims that ABIM was harming communal relations by addressing the topic "Islam – Solution to the Problems of a Multi-Racial Society" in his presidential address to ABIM in July 1979. In 1981, Anwar again worked closely with non-Malays when he led opposition to government amendments of the Societies Act – designed to crack down on the political activities of NGOs. In March 1982, in the middle of this campaign, Anwar stunned the country when he accepted an invitation from Mahathir to join UMNO and contest the upcoming federal election.

3.4 *In Government*

WHY did Anwar take this unexpected step? He had, technically, been an UMNO member for several years, and some journalists suggested this might be significant, but Anwar dismissed this observing that his father had registered his name but he had never taken part in UMNO activities or considered himself a member. His own explanation was that he accepted the objectives of the Mahathir administration, and believed in Mahathir's sincerity. In retrospect, the move was perhaps not all that surprising. Membership of PAS was never really an option; Anwar was always interested in concrete achievements, and PAS had little to offer outside Kelantan. Faced with a choice of remaining independent or joining UMNO, he would have seen a rare window of opportunity to join the ruling party. He remained young enough to work his way up through the ranks – an important consideration, as UMNO would never accept an outsider going straight to the top. And UMNO under Mahathir was closer to Anwar's own ideology than it had been in earlier times. Perhaps also there was a more prosaic element: now well in his thirties, and having married in February 1980 (to a British-trained doctor), moving to a more conventional career may have been a natural evolution. ABIM gave its blessing to the move, but was deeply split and took years to regain momentum.

In his first test in UMNO Anwar stood in a Penang constituency that had been part of his father's electorate, and secured a landslide win. His subsequent career in the party and government has invariably been described as 'meteoric', though steady progression would be more accurate. He began well, winning a close contest for leadership of the UMNO Youth – a key party post ranking just below that of elected vice presidents – a few months after joining. In this position his most noted achievement was to lead the campaign for the handing back of Carcosa – the former home of British colonial rulers, presented to Britain by Tunku Abdul Rahman on independence. He remained Youth leader for six years before direct election to a vice presidency, securing the third highest number of votes. In 1990, he advanced further when he secured the highest number of votes in the vice

presidential contest. Finally, in 1993, he contested the deputy post, securing such overwhelming support that the incumbent, Ghafar Baba, withdrew without contest. He maintained this position in 1996, under the Mahathir-engineered arrangement for reaffirming the top two posts without contest.

Anwar's progress in UMNO was remarkable, as he joined without a natural party base. ABIM supporters who went with him were vastly out-numbered, and only began to attain influential party posts around the mid 1990s. Many older members were initially hostile. His previous career gave him a natural rapport with younger members, but he also demonstrated important tactical skills – including an ability to build alliances with different factions, and choose the right moment to move.

Anwar's government career also helped build his credibility in the party. For this, he had Mahathir to thank. He began as a deputy minister in the prime minister's department, looking after mainly Islamic issues. He continued thereafter to retain a number of Islamic responsibilities, but only twelve months later became a full minister in the portfolio of Youth Culture and Sport, a position that complemented his leadership of UMNO Youth. He then spent two years in Agriculture and five in Education, both portfolios giving access to influential groups within UMNO. Finance, which he took over in 1991, was important to provide credibility with the newly-emerging business sector – the *Melayu baru* (new Malays) – who had become perhaps the dominant group in UMNO by the early 1990s. His additional post of Deputy Prime Minister came with his 1993 election to the UMNO deputy presidency.

Apart from assisting his progress in the party Anwar's ministerial career has also been a through preparation for national leadership. He was able to consolidate initially in areas of some expertise before taking on finance, a portfolio that is obviously critical to managing the country in the future. As Finance Minister and

Deputy Prime Minister he has travelled extensively, acquiring a considerable international reputation. He has often spoken critically of the West, though with less vitriol than Mahathir. Asia has assumed a high priority in his international concerns, reflected in the title of his second book, *The Asian Renaissance*. But he has also warned against Asian hubris, and acknowledged Asian shortcomings in areas such as economic and social justice.

What does Anwar stand for now? By some accounts he is the epitome of the *Melayu baru*, – "Firmly urban, many of them professionals, they move comfortably in the booming Malaysian corporate scene and have their sights fixed on the prime minister's oft-stated goal of transforming Malaysia into a fully industrialised country by the year 2020".⁹ Anwar has made a success of the finance portfolio. He gained international plaudits when the economy boomed, and has been seen as the voice of economic reason in recent times of crisis. He is at home in the corporate world. But he has not gone into business personally, and has often spoken critically about the pursuit of rapid economic growth without any higher purpose. He has also published two books, one based on articles and speeches in the 1980s (Anwar 1989), and another similar work in the 1990s (Anwar 1996), which reiterate themes that were prominent in his earlier political career. The former raises issues such as the continuing importance of Malay poverty, the need to have Malay culture accepted as the basis of Malaysian culture, the importance of inter-communal dialogue, opposition to western cultural colonialism, the importance of pursuing knowledge in all fields, and the evils of corruption. The later collection highlights the Asian contribution in areas such as civil society, justice, equity and ethical principles.

In short, Anwar straddles the divide between the *Melayu baru* and the former student idealist. On the international stage, and with the local corporate sector, he is seen as an urban and enlightened finance minister. Yet in everyday

political life he combines what many see as an esoteric interest in cultural and philosophical issues, with support for a moderate and progressive form of Islam, opposition to corruption, and concern for the welfare of both the rural and urban poor.

4. The Mahathir-Anwar Relationship

THOUGH born two decades apart, there are many similarities in the careers of Mahathir and Anwar, and in the ideas they developed. Both began life in a middle class or lower-middle class family, unlike previous Malaysian leaders who were from an aristocratic background. They had a similar secondary education, gaining a thorough grounding in English language, literature and history. Both studied at local universities rather than overseas, and although they took different courses pursued similar concerns in relation to Malay nationalism. In subsequent years both addressed issues relating to Islam and colonialism in similar ways. Both also experienced a period of political banishment, and in each case this appears to have strengthened their political will.

There are, of course, differences between them. Mahathir's anti-colonialism derives from personal experience, while Anwar's is based more on intellectual perception. Their approach to problem-solving tends to be different. Mahathir is the practical man, the doctor trained to analyse problems, the pragmatic businessman, and an enthusiast for technological gadgets. Anwar has a more philosophical bent, and remains unprepared to put aside the "life of contemplation" (Anwar 1996, p.15). Mahathir focuses on economic growth; Anwar talks more of poverty and redistribution. Mahathir is often critical of NGOs; Anwar speaks passionately of the need for a more active civil society. Still, differences such as these are matters of nuance, not of fundamentals.

⁹ Vatikiotis, M and Tsuruoka, D, "Young Turks on the Move", Far Eastern

Similarities in the political careers and views of Mahathir and Anwar, and long periods of working together, should ensure a broad policy continuity after Anwar takes over, and may also help facilitate an orderly transfer of power. But relations between them can never be completely without tension. Mahathir has to keep on demonstrating that he remains in control, or party members will quickly conclude he no longer is. Anwar, on the other hand, has to show that he is ready to take over whenever required, or someone else will emerge to challenge his position as the heir apparent. Complicating matters further are the supporters of both, locked in an intense struggle to entrench their own position and frustrate the other side.

Mahathir and Anwar did, as noted, have a difficult relationship in the 1970s, at the time Mahathir was Education minister. And Mahathir acknowledged in 1996 that there had been times when he doubted Anwar's loyalty in government.¹⁰ The first occasion was probably in 1993 when Anwar ran for the UMNO deputy presidency, against Mahathir's wishes – not because Mahathir preferred incumbent Ghafar to Anwar, but because he wanted the support of both. While Mahathir did ultimately support Anwar's campaign, he waited a month after his election before appointing him deputy prime minister. Other problems arose in 1995, when Anwar supporters defeated a number of Mahathir's allies in UMNO divisional elections.

Difficulties between the two appear to have intensified over the past year in relation to the economic crisis. Certainly, their handling of this issue has been different – Mahathir ignited international fears and hostility, while Anwar demonstrated a deft touch in calming such feelings. And on four or five occasions statements by Mahathir have subsequently been 'clarified' by Anwar, leading many observers to see major policy differences between them. This is not the

Economic Review, 30 September, 1993.

place to address such issues in detail,¹¹ but it should be noted that conflicting statements have been quickly resolved by Anwar's clarifications, suggesting a broader degree of agreement than is commonly supposed. Superficially, they differ over the nature of the crisis – Mahathir condemning it as an entirely destructive force unleashed by external forces, while Anwar has acknowledged domestic weaknesses and spoken of "creative destruction". But, as previously noted, Mahathir has taken steps to promote domestic reform; his reluctance to highlight this issue is probably to ensure any shortcomings are not sheeted home to his leadership. Anwar, on the other hand, has often been outspoken in addressing the external aspects of the problem.

Mahathir and Anwar have succeeded in working through many difficulties in the past, and periods of difficulty have been fewer than times when they have worked co-operatively together. As noted, their relationship began in 1969, when Anwar supported Mahathir's opposition to Tunku Abdul Rahman. Anwar entered UMNO at Mahathir's behest in 1982, and supported him in the critical battle for control of UMNO in 1987. Mahathir in turn has appointed Anwar to portfolios tailor-made to equip him to take over the top post, and has repeatedly declared that Anwar will be his successor. When and how Anwar succeeds Mahathir remain unknowable. But the parallel and intersecting aspects of their careers, and the tactical skills which both have demonstrated, make it likely that they will manage the change without a destructive contest.

¹⁰ Berita Harian, 7 August, 1996.

¹¹ I have discussed Mahathir-Anwar relations during the economic crisis in "Thailand/Malaysia: Stable Institutions in the Midst of a Crisis"? pp.23-25. Paper for Workshop entitled "Redeveloping Good Neighbourly Relations. Profiles of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Our Trading Partners", organised by The Australian National University, North Australia Research Unit, Darwin, 4-5 June 1998. Workshop proceedings will be published later this year.

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