

## MALAYSIA AND MAHATHIR IN THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE

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### ABSTRAK

Tujuan *paper* ini adalah untuk menganalisis kebijakan Mahathir melalui perspektif sejarah terhadap perkembangan politik dan tantangan di Malaysia. Selain itu, Penulis menggunakan data sekunder untuk mengumpulkan berbagai literatur terkait dengan topik tersebut. Kembalinya Mahathir Muhammad, Bapak Modernisasi Malaysia, dalam Pemilihan Umum ke-14 setelah meninggalkan panggung politik lebih dari satu dekade telah menarik perhatian masyarakat global. Sebagai kritikus pada korupsi dan kemunduran ekonomi Malaysia, dia memutuskan untuk maju dalam pemilihan umum sekali lagi. Selama pemerintahan sebelumnya, Mahathir dengan proyek megah yaitu Pembangunan Putra Jaya dan kebijakan luar negerinya, terkenal dengan “*Look East Policy*” menjadi bagian dari identitasnya. Kebijakan “*Look East Policy*” dikembangkan untuk meningkatkan pertumbuhan ekonomi domestik dan karena Malaysia perlu belajar dan mengadopsi budaya dari Jepang dan Korea, seperti kedisiplinan dan kerja keras. Melalui Kebijakan tersebut, Malaysia telah melakukan kerjasama dengan negara Timur (Jepang dan Korea). Selain itu, Mahathir menolak penerapan nilai-nilai Barat dan menganggap bahwa nilai Barat tidak sesuai dengan Asia. Negara-negara Barat menganggap Mahathir sebagai penghalang persatuan negara Barat dengan negara Asia sejak berkembangnya paham “*Asian Values*” pada tahun 1990an. Secara Keseluruhan, *paper* ini berpendapat bahwa Mahathir hanya fokus kepada kepentingan dan kedaulatan negaranya dan menjaga eksistensi Malaysia di dunia internasional.

**Kata kunci:** Mahathir, Nilai Asia, Kebijakan Melihat ke Timur, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze Mahathir’s policy through a historical approach to the political developments and challenges in Malaysia. In addition, the author uses secondary data in order to collect several resources related to the topic. The comeback of Mahathir Mohammad, the Father of Malaysian modernization, in the Malaysian 14<sup>th</sup> general election after leaving the political stage for more than a decade draws many global eyes. As the great critics of the corruption and downturn of Malaysian economic conditions, he decided to run in Malaysia once again. During his previous administration, his mega-project named Pembangunan Putra Jaya and his famous foreign policy “*Look East Policy*” became a part of his identity. The “*Look East Policy*” was developed in order to increase domestic economic growth and because Malaysia needed to learn and adopt cultural features from Japan and Korea, such as discipline and hard work. Through this policy, Malaysia began cooperating with East countries (Japan and Korea). In addition, Mahathir had been opposing Western values and deemed them incompatible with Asia. The West considers Mahathir to be an obstacle in uniting Western and Asian countries following the emergence of Asian values since the 1990s. Overall, this study suggests that Mahathir is only focused on his country’s national interest and sovereignty and maintaining Malaysia’s international standing.

**Keywords:** Mahathir, Asian Values, Look East Policy, Malaysia.

### Introduction

The return of Mahathir Mohammad on the Malaysian political stage after retiring for 15

years from his position as Prime Minister and leader of the Barisan Nasional party (UMNO / United Malay National Organization) since

2003 produced a separate discourse. It's becoming one of the trending topics in several international media because of his age, 93 years as a Prime Minister candidate when the election took place in Malaysia. After completing medical studies, Mahathir opened a clinic his birthplace along with his wife who is also a medical expert. However, after a few years Mahathir understood that the country's economic conditions related to the welfare of the Malaysian people were still experiencing a downturn. This prompted Mahathir to decide to enter politics which began membership in the UMNO party. But his decision right now was motivated by the corruption such the issue on 1Malaysia Development Berhad (IMDB), the lowest national economic growth and huge debt under previous government. Regarding the background, this study will analyze on "How does Mahathir's policy impact toward Malaysia economy and political development?"

### **Mahathir Administration**

Mahathir's long journey in Malaysian politics led him to occupy a number of positions, starting with parliamentarians, Ministers, and was elected as Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003 (Muda, 2008). During his 22 years in leading Malaysia, Mahathir has scored various successes. From the aspect of infrastructure, he has built public transport such as: MRT (Mass Rapid Transit), LRT (Light Rail Transit), and trains that connect several major cities on the Malay Peninsula. The saturation of the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur as the core of business, education, and tourism, underwent a significant change when Mahathir created a mega-project namely Pembangunan Negeri Persekutuan Malaysia, Putra Jaya. Pembangunan Putra Jaya is a solution for the Malaysian government to be more effective and efficient. Putra Jaya was also highlighted by the International Community for Malaysia's success in moving its central government. To

meet the electricity needs, Mahathir built the "Bakun Dam" Giant Dam in (Sarawak) East Malaysia. It is expected that the project can meet domestic energy needs.

In 1997/1998, Mahathir was the key in protecting his economy when the neighboring countries experienced economic crises (Dosch, 2014). He firmly "REFUSED" offers of "soft loans" from the IMF and World Bank. However, this is what makes Malaysia a survivor of the huge debt felt by other countries, such as Korea and Indonesia. Mahathir said that the economic crisis was his country's responsibility and that debt with American institutions (IMF and World Bank) was not a solution and guarantee of the future. However, when other countries have difficulty facing the economic crisis, they are inaugurated the twin towers (Twin Tower) of PETRONAS. The existence of the tower is a symbol of the progress and civilization of Malaysia in the international community. The rapid development of infrastructure in Malaysia in the 1990s indicated that Malaysia had succeeded in increasing the country's economic growth.

### **Mahathir's Foreign Policy**

To increase domestic economic growth, improve human resources, develop technology and strengthen relations with other countries, Mahathir introduced his foreign policy, namely "Look East Policy" (Furuoka, 2007). The policy became the identity of Mahathir in leading Malaysia for more than two decades. Mahathir clearly said that Malaysia deserves to learn and adopt cultures from Japan and Korea, such as discipline and hard work. Through Look East Policy, in the aspect of education, Mahathir sent tens of thousands of Malaysian students to continue their higher education in Japan and Korea. This indirectly results in closer relations between countries. Students who have completed education at the University become a bridge for Japanese and

Korean companies to invest in Malaysia. In addition, Malaysia itself provides easier access to Japanese and Korean investors. In the aspect of technology, Japan indirectly transfers technology with the construction of public transport, such as: MRT and LRT. This certainly makes the Malaysian Community understand and enjoy global technological advancements that have been developed by developed countries.

Regarding national cars, Mahathir offers cooperation in the automotive sector with Japanese companies, such as Mitsubishi, Toyota, Honda, and Kawasaki to help Malaysia produce national car products popularly known as PROTON (Furuoka, 2007). PROTON's presence became a symbol of reinforcement for the progress of Malaysia at that time, because Malaysia became the first country in Southeast Asia to have a National Car. Furthermore, PROTON is produced in large quantities to be sold to neighboring countries. ASEAN member countries, such as Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines and Thailand, have become PROTON markets at the regional level. Even in Indonesia alone, PROTON showrooms are perched in several major cities including Jakarta.

Technological developments and the economic shift of Malaysian society towards a middle-income society have brought many changes to domestic development. Communities are increasingly critical of government programs, such as infrastructure development in the form of toll roads and highways to facilitate goods and human mobility. Malaysia adopted a development model adopted by Japan in its country to make improvements to the physical infrastructure and culture of the people. However, Mahathir's policy in the form of Look East Policy invited critics from western countries, such as the UK and U.S. Western countries advise Malaysia not to fully see

Japan and Korea as the country's development models. The UK also stressed the importance of cooperation between Commonwealth countries. However, the labels and assumptions of the western state turned out to be like a passing wind for Mahathir. The West's distrust of Malaysia to become a developed country is a challenge for Mahathir. Of course, the West is aware that the deterioration of their relationship with Malaysia has an impact on the slow pace of economic growth. In addition, Mahathir also emphasized its citizens to continue higher education in Japan and Korea not to UK, US, or other European countries. Mahathir's policy became a warning and slap for western countries, especially the UK, which at that time carried out controversial policies with increases in tuition fees for all foreign students in the U.K. Universities (Furuoka, 2007). This made Mahathir send a protest note and hold a limited meeting to avoid negative effects for Malaysian students studying in the UK.

### **Mahathir, Asian Values, And Economic Growth**

Together with the Former Singapore Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir firmly rejected the western state project labeled Human right and Democracy. The Human rights conference held in Vienna in 1993 and attended by dozens of countries from various regions, did not seem to produce a consensus that could be accepted by all state representatives present, especially countries in Asia, such as: Malaysia, Singapore and China. Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew, the two explained that Asia does not need to adopt and introduce western values (western values), because Asia itself has a strong cultural foundation and is familiar with the Asian Values. The definition of human rights has many interpretations for Western and Asian societies. For Western society, freedom is a priority in several aspects. However, this is

contrary to the application of freedom for Asian people who still need discipline and hard work, respect the older, and maintain family values (Ciorciari, 2012). Western Values described in the form of human rights and Democracy are clearly not in line with Asian Values (Thompson, 2004). The emergence of Asian Values, which has become a discourse in International Relations since the 1990s has resulted cross ideas between the East and the West, even Asia insisted to maintain his own values. However, the existence of the East Asian Miracle from 1965-1985 led by Japan, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and several other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, became a strong reason to reject and become a fence iron against the entry of western culture in Asia (Furuoka, 2007). Malaysia as one of the nations in Asia has shown the World that its country is able to stand in line with other developed nations. The Malaysian economy has progressed very rapidly, and national politics has been stable with minimal domestic conflict.

### **Mahathir and 14<sup>th</sup> General Election**

Mahathir's long journey on the Malaysian political stage from 1981 to 2003 has provided many changes so he was called the Father of Malaysian Modernization. Mahathir's name has never vanished from political conversation in Malaysia and Asia. Even his policy is a reference and model of development for countries in Asia and Africa. After leaving the political stage for more than a decade, Mahathir began to speak out and criticize the government because Malaysia's economic conditions experienced a downturn. The Ringgit exchange rate fell, foreign debt swelled, economic growth was very slow, people's welfare was far from the standard, and the cost of living was increasingly expensive. Mahathir's sharp criticism is increasingly overflowing and has the support of Malaysian

society. This still continues ahead of the 14th Malaysian Prime Minister or PRU election when 93-year-old Mahathir decides to contest the election of the Prime Minister in order to overthrow corrupt Governments and improve the Malaysian economy.

The appearance of Mahathir in the 14th PRU not only shocked the Malaysian community, but also the international community. Mahathir's presence in Malaysian politics indirectly strengthens the position and image of Malaysia in the international community. The world knows and is familiar with him, especially the western countries that have been and are often hostile to Mahathir in aspects of international policy ideas. Mahathir reaps a variety of predictions, for ASEAN, he is a breath of fresh air to reaffirm the establishment of ASEAN by promoting the basic principles of ASEAN, namely increasing the welfare of ASEAN people and maintaining ASEAN regional stability. In contrast to western countries, they have concerns if Mahathir is re-elected as Prime Minister of Malaysia. The West considers Mahathir to be one of the obstacles and a gap to unite Western and Asian countries (Bernama, 2019). Mahathir's idea that is always sensitive and opposing to the western countries is also a stumbling block in producing consensus.

Mahathir was not only careful and understood well about the dynamics of international politics, but also mastered the domestic problems of his country that was in debt. On September 8, 2016, Mahathir has formed a new party in Malaysia, the Malaysia United Native Party (PPBM). However, to advance to the election of the Prime Minister, Mahathir decided his Party joined the opposition (Pakatan Harapan) which consisted of several parties, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People's Justice Party (PKR), and the National Amanah Party (AMANAH).

After going through the campaign period, general elections and vote counts as part of the democratic process, Mahathir who ran as Prime Minister of Malaysia through the Pakatan Harapan coalition party won 112 parliamentary seats out of a total of 222 seats. Finally, on May 10, 2018, Mahathir Mohammad was officially appointed as the 7th Malaysian Prime Minister replacing Najib Razak (Mahathir Mohamad sworn in as new leader of Malaysia, 2018).

### **Mahathir's Policy And Chinese Project**

Malaysia's political event which is still held by Mahathir is a concern for its neighbors. Within weeks of serving as the new Prime Minister, Mahathir conducted an evaluation of all mega-projects in Malaysia, most of which were included in the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. Mahathir emphasized the importance of the project on a priority scale for Malaysia's current needs given the increasing amount of state debt. Through his economic advisors and ministers, Mahathir decided to cancel several major Chinese projects and postpone other projects until the Malaysian economy recovered (Erickson, 2018). Mahathir's policy certainly made China angry because Mahathir indirectly opposed the Chinese agenda in the frame of "One Belt and Road" or OBOR by reevaluating all cooperation that had been approved by the previous government, such as the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore Fast Train, which was included in the SKRL project (Singapore-Kunming rail link).

### **Mahathir And Singapore Relation**

International communities, such as: China, Japan and Korea cannot underestimate Mahathir's policies. He is not only the key to entering investment in Malaysia, but also an obstacle to intervention from other countries. Mahathir has pledged to the Malaysian community to improve the economy of his

country which is in decline. So that various policies are used to get out of debt. Not only with China, Mahathir also evaluated cooperation with Singapore (Sidhu, 2006), which has been going on for decades regarding the sale of clean water to Singapore. Mahathir will force change in consensus regarding the selling price of Malaysian clean water to Singapore because according to him the current selling price is very inappropriate and detrimental to Malaysia (Sidhu, 2006).

Reflecting on Mahathir's political actions when his old friend, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew led Singapore, Mahathir once threatened to stop the supply of clean water to Singapore from Johor. This certainly becomes a serious problem for relations between the two countries. It is undeniable, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong who is also the son of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew certainly needs to learn from Mahathir to find out how to maintain relations with other countries. Indirectly, concerns were clearly felt by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when Human Half Gods, a term for Mahathir to lead Malaysia back. Not only the issue of Clean Water, Singapore also has to deal with border issues with Malaysia. Mahathir made an agenda to make a mega-project in the form of Artificial Islands, which is larger than Batu Island Puteh (Branca Islands).

### **Mahathir And Japan Relation**

However, the return of Mahathir to the Malaysian political scene was a breath of fresh air for Japanese and Korean investors. Japan and Korea, both of which are ready to take over various projects launched by Mahathir. This was proven by Mahathir's first state visit to Japan after being appointed as Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir's agenda to Japan is certainly clearly related to economic cooperation and reminds Japan of the longstanding relationships that have been

established and has succeeded in increasing economic growth for both countries (Japan and Malaysia eye close ties based on Mahathir's 'Look East' policy, 2019). Without circumvention, Malaysia currently needs Japanese assistance to improve Malaysia's fallen economy. On the other hand, this is an opportunity for Japan to become a leading investor in Malaysia, because in recent decades China has dominated investment in Malaysia.

### **Conclusion**

The political and economic shift is a challenge for Mahathir to bring Malaysia to a better direction. During his visit to Beijing, China, after meeting with President Xi Jinping, Mahathir emphasized the importance of mutual trust for the relationship between the two countries in the future. Mahathir conveyed directly the cancellation of the mega-project in front of President Xi Jinping because Malaysia's economic conditions were very bad. Malaysia certainly wants to cooperate with China because China is the country with the second largest economic power in the World after U.S and one of the countries that have helped several ASEAN countries during the economic crisis. But for now, Mahathir is only focused on restoring his country's economy. Within a few months as Prime Minister, Mahathir clearly did not prioritize the interests of the individuals compared to his State. In addition, Mahathir's policies support his country's national interest and sovereignty. He did not want Malaysia to break apart and to suffer under oppression in the long run if it relies too heavily on China. Nevertheless, he threads carefully the path of cooperation to promote healthy diplomatic and trade relations with other countries, especially China, to maintain peace in the region and the World.

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