

My Recollections
Mahathir bin Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia
By SGI President Ikeda

I met Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia the morning of Feb. 6, 1988, when that country was in the midst of a political tempest. Two days earlier, on Feb. 4, the political party United Malays National Organization, which Prime Minister Mahathir headed, had been outlawed by the Malaysian courts. A rebel faction within the party revealed that the party wasn't in complete compliance with the law (certain local chapters had not properly registered as political groups), so the Supreme Court in Kuala Lumpur declared the entire party unlawful.

This decision astonished everyone. How did this affect the party's elected representatives? What about cabinet members? It was a development that could easily hinder the entire nation's ability to function.

On Feb. 5, the prime minister held a news conference and, explaining that the government and the party were two separate entities, attempted to gain control of the situation. But given that Malaysia's leading political party had suddenly been deregistered, confusion continued.

In the midst of this political turmoil, I met with the prime minister. Though he had a reputation for being tough, Dr. Mahathir looked a bit tired. Still, in spite of his understandably busy schedule, there he stood, a dignified presence, awaiting me at the door to his office.

And he greeted me cheerfully. He wore a name tag on his jacket, stating plainly, "Mahathir." When he took office in 1981, one of his first declared goals was to energize the civil service. He instituted the use of timecards to record working hours, and punched one himself every morning and evening. He also began requiring all civil servants to wear name tags — to instill a sense of responsibility for one's work — and took the lead by wearing a name tag himself.

"In every age and in every nation," I said to the prime minister, "those in positions of leadership suffer hardship. By overcoming that hardship, they come to shine with even greater brilliance." Prime Minister Mahathir nodded and shared his vision of leadership with me. Leaders are always confronted with difficult situations, he said. One of the key requirements of leaders, he asserted, is the resolve to surmount difficulties. Another is the courage to seek out and take on challenges.

The crisis surrounding the UMNO died down when, on Feb. 13, Dr. Mahathir announced the establishment of a new party. There is an old Malaysian saying, "There is no ocean without waves." Opposition always arises when one attempts to accomplish something meaningful. Prime Minister Mahathir's bold actions — to realize his heartfelt goal of developing Malaysia into a modern nation worthy of the respect and admiration of the world — have always placed him in the center of controversy.

He is a man of principle who speaks his mind. Many have been startled by his frankness, but no one doubts his sincerity and dedication. For example, he supported Nelson Mandela, now president of South Africa, during his long imprisonment, vehemently denouncing apartheid.

All his actions have been motivated by his strong opposition to bullying and the use of force. "I strongly object, whatever the issue and whomever it involves, when someone is patronizing or tries to coerce others by exploiting their weaknesses....," he said. "No matter how powerful my opponent may be, if I don't agree with him, I don't agree with him."1

He mentioned that when still a practicing physician, treating the poor into the late hours

of the night, he was driven by the thought “We must do something about poverty before we do anything else.” In the same spirit, he staunchly spoke out against the power politics of the major powers and the condescending attitude of the West toward Asia, emphasizing that Asia has its own values that must be respected. He underscored the need to recognize a plurality of cultures and values.

Criticizing the spirit’s desolation caused by materialism, he has insisted that one’s spiritual state is more important than material wealth. And he has described the ideal developed nation as a caring nation, a virtuous society in which spiritual and material wealth are both achieved. This is the so-called Asian Renaissance, a new challenge to realize an ideal civilization.

Prime Minister Mahathir has said repeatedly that Japan should assume the leadership in the Asian Renaissance. His “Look East” policy, which takes Japan and Korea as models for development, is an expression of that belief.

At our meeting, he said that Japan had provided other Asian countries with a fine example of a poor nation becoming wealthy. Other Asian nations want to learn from Japan’s example, he said. They look to Japan to give them greater opportunities to do so.

In the past, he observed, America acted as the engine for Japan’s economic development, providing an enormous market for its goods and generously sharing its technology and business methods. This resulted in Japan’s economic success. He hoped Japan would become the engine for Asia’s development.

But Japan, I’m afraid, has not met Malaysia’s high hopes. Though there has been a certain amount of sincere effort on the part of some individuals, Japanese government and industry essentially continue to view their neighbors in Asia not as partners but as economic colonies to be exploited for whatever profit they can derive.

Why does Japan only take and take? Why doesn’t it extend a helping hand to its neighbors? Many Malaysians ask these questions in despair. The same disappointment and distrust can be heard from Malaysian students sent to Japan to learn from its example. They decry the discrimination against non-Japanese Asians that is rife in Japan; the way Japanese often treat them condescendingly but then turn around and are all smiles to Westerners. Malaysian students also proudly assert that blind obedience — the rule between seniors and juniors at almost all levels of Japanese society — is not found in Malaysia.

Another criticism of Japan is that its young people have no interest in learning about other Asian cultures. Japanese youth are a spoiled and sorry lot, they claim. Given everything they want by their elders, they are utterly ignorant and indifferent to the hard work and sacrifice that made this possible. Japan, the Malaysian students point out, needs to be “opened” once again, just as it was in 1868’s Meiji Restoration.

These criticisms pain me, because I know they are true. And there are further causes for concern. Because of Japan’s insistence on distorting historical record, the massacre of Malay sians by Japanese troops during World War II is not understood well by the average Japanese. Women, the elderly, even tiny infants were mercilessly slaughtered. Entire villages were wiped out. The invasion of Malaysia took place one hour and 50 minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbor, making it the true beginning of the Pacific War. But not even this is known by many Japanese.

I have dedicated myself to building bridges between our nations — not just talking about it, but really doing it. My beloved mentor, Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, told me to start with the most difficult thing. After that, he said, everything else would be easy. This is true of human relations and institutional reforms alike.

I have followed Mr. Toda’s advice. First, I paved the way to cultural exchange with nations of the communist bloc. Next, I blazed a trail of peace with our Asian neighbors in

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an attempt to heal the deep scars of history.

Malaysia comprises various races and cultures. Its religions are different, as are its traditions. Reflecting on the difficulties national leaders of nations face, I asked Prime Minister Mahathir what the key is to steering a complex society in the direction of development, while preserving harmony among the constituent components. Concurring that a nation is indeed an agglomeration of diverse parts, the prime minister answered that culture is the most important factor. Because of this, he said, an understanding of the culture that supports a society is indispensable to harmonious development.

In the evening of the same day of our meeting, a joint performance to celebrate Malaysia–Japan relations was held. Prime Minister Mahathir and four of his cabinet ministers attended, viewing fine performances of Japan’s Kikunokai (Chrysanthemum Troupe) and the Malaysia National Dance Troupe affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

I’ll never forget the performance of the Japanese folk dance from Tokushima Prefecture, the famous Awa Odori. The men bent low, dancing in a near squat, while the slim women, wearing large reed hats, swayed gracefully. The cheerful, humorous dance created a happy, harmonious atmosphere.

At the end of the dance, in the midst of tumultuous applause, we were all in for a surprise. As the women removed their reed hats, a gasp of astonishment rose from the crowd — many of the women were not Japanese but Malaysians! Later on, Japanese dancers joined in some of the Malaysian dances as well.

Here was a brilliant glimpse, I thought, of the rainbow-colored Asian Renaissance awaiting us in the future.

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1. From a feature on Prime Minister Mahathir in the weekly column “Watakushi no Rirekisho” (My Profile), in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (Japan Economic Journal), Nov. 28, 1995.

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