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## Malaysia and Mahathir



BY Tom Plate

Los Angeles — When "Conversations with Mahathir," the second of four volumes in the Giants of Asia series, was published a few years ago, some of my friends and colleagues were utterly aghast. How could you — gullible American author — dignify this vulgar man with such semi-reverential treatment? My gosh, what a sleazy ruling party UMNO has been, and what a complete sleaze Mahathir Mohamad must be!

The winds of criticism blew especially hard from southern neighbor Singapore, which has never shown much love for Dr. M and his Malaysia ever since its unceremonious expulsion from the Malaysian Federation of Malaysia in 1965. A prime mover in shoving Singapore out was in fact Mahathir, who went on to become leader of UMNO and then, via successive parliamentary elections perhaps mainly notable for such suspiciously lethargic oppositions, prime minister from 1972-2003.

And so Mahathir, now 90, surprised most everyone by quitting the UMNO party the other day in protest over the scandal involving the current Prime Minister Najib Razak, said to have clustered together an astonishing fortune in a webby network of secret accounts strung together from public funds. For months the shrewd Dr. M, originally a country doctor, has been calling for full disclosure to the public about the mysterious fortune. With no answer coming back from the slick, arrogant Najib, Mahathir, who helped built UMNO into what it is today, resigned from it.

Cynics will say it was a cynical move and a purely political one. But at his age Dr. M's main aspiration is for little more than continued positive health; and, at his age, the desire for a positive legacy. Is an UMNO, which enables its leader to aggregate something like a billion dollars - more or less illegally, arrogantly and insistently - worthy of maintaining any longer?

Mahathir's interviews for my book took place in 2011, and I pressed him several times on the money-politics issue. His short answer was that the publicly listed salary for the PM during his run of 23 years was about \$35,000 annually. When he said that, he looked at me quietly, intently. Right, I had my answer — no PM, except perhaps a Saint Gandhi-type, can get by on that. But what about his sticky-fingered UMNO? He frankly admitted that the Malaysian political dilemma required money — and even more money - to glue the party together, which party being, in his view, the main glue that

held the nation together and keep it moving forward.

The argument made sense to me. This was also the way in Indonesia, and Thailand, and so on. What I especially liked about Mahathir was his directness, his desire — perhaps in part through my little book - to leave something behind that was untarnished, truthful, real. This desire, of a rapidly aging man, was the main motive, I believe, behind the recent resignation.

Dr. M and the late, great Lee Kuan Yew were anything but buddies, of course. LKY thought Malaysia should have been made far better than it was; Dr. M viewed LKY as someone who thought he was far better than anyone else. But the bottom line in their relationship was a floor of mutual respect. The Malaysian viewed his antagonist as a true intellectual with a genuinely powerful mind. For his part, the Singaporean legend had to admit that Dr M had done well with what he had to work with. "He was an outstanding Prime Minister of Malaysia," LKY told me, who "transformed Malaysia."

But with his resignation, Mahathir in effect was admitting that the transformation hadn't gone far enough. Malaysia will never be as political squeaky-clean as Singapore, and perhaps that's not all so bad when the political homogeneity that Singaporeans have had to pay for that extreme cleanliness is taken into account. Even so, there is no doubt that Dr M's largely Muslim country would be better off if its top politicians did not become so well off.

But let us not forget this: During an epoch in which poisonous Islamic extremism was stewing almost everywhere in Asia, Mahathir kept the lid on in his country without turning it remotely into Myanmar under the generals, not to mention into a North Korea under an under-qualified thirty-something. The country was not perfect, but it was not evil, and it was no one's danger; and it had a prime minister who knew what he was doing and got a lot of what he wanted done. By comparison to the incumbent prime minister, indeed he was a giant of Asia — by no little margin.

*Professor Tom Plate's latest book is 'The Fine Art of the Political Interview.' His "Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew" (Giants of Asia) recently was reissued in a Popular Holdings Ltd.*