

Mahathir Returns Fire on Critical Book

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Malaysia's former premier says he'll cooperate with a commission to investigate his reign

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has hit back at a book by former Asian Wall Street Journal editor Barry Wain that contained allegations Mahathir wasted RM100 billion (US\$40 billion) on grandiose projects and corruption during his 22 years as premier.

Mahathir said he would welcome a royal commission to look into the charges and demanded that the book be released to the public. Malaysian customs has been sitting on the book, titled "Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times," for about a month in its Port Klang facility, apparently concerned about the controversy it would raise, or perhaps concerned about Mahathir's own wrath.

"I am not in need of government protection," Mahathir declared on his website, Che Det, a title taken from a childhood nickname. He also said he reserves the right to sue Wain, opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, who requested the royal commission, and the popular website Malaysiakini for libel for a sum to be determined later depending on the findings of the investigative body.

Mahathir said the commission should include not just nominees by the government but foreigners and representatives of Transparency International, which keeps track of corruption in countries across the world.

However, he also said the commission should also focus on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who followed him as prime minister and who he spent years trying to bring down. He questioned the spending of RM 270 billion (US\$78.5 billion) of Petronas funds during Abdullah's five-year term in office. He remains outraged over Abdullah's cancellation of two of his most cherished projects, a so-called crooked bridge over the Johor causeway to Singapore - which Singapore's government didn't want - and a railway project from Johor Baru in the south of the country to the Thai border.

"The government isn't one man alone," a source friendly to the onetime premier said. *"He may take the rap for everybody but that's part and parcel of being a leader. A lot of people were involved. And it wasn't that many of the ideas weren't good, some were good, some were bad- but the execution is another thing. You can't blame Dr M for everything that has gone wrong by the people entrusted to do it."*

Mahathir did not include on his website a request to investigate the reign of Najib Tun Razak, the current prime minister, who as defense minister was involved in a series of massive cost overruns and questionable military purchases, including the US\$1 billion purchase and/or lease of three French submarines, which earned his best friend, Abdul Razak Baginda, a €114 million "commission." There are widespread suspicions that the commission was disbursed back to UMNO cronies and possibly top French officials.

It is certain that Mahathir has a good idea where most of the bodies have been buried over the last 40 years. Turning the charges away from his own reign, Mahathir asked:

“What is the cost over-run in the construction of the Bakun Hydroelectric project?” The Bakun Dam hydroelectric project was begun in the 1980s when Mahathir was prime minister and has been roundly criticized as a huge white elephant. According to projections at the time it was started, the entire island of Borneo would never be able to use the power in the foreseeable future, and a plan to pipe the power underwater to West Malaysia would result in more power being lost to leakage than would arrive in West Malaysia. The dam, which would cover more area than the entire island of Singapore, was mostly regarded as a pretext to allow Sarawakian government interests to harvest the valuable tropical timber in the catchment area.

Mahathir also questioned the financing of a second bridge across the Penang strait to the mainland “and the procedure followed when giving out this contract.”

He called on the government to “give the undertaking to give full access to the commission of all the documents and accounts of the government over the period 1981-2009. There should be no cover-up of any kind,” and demanded that Wain “provide documentary proof of any sum that he alleged I had burned.” He said he would cooperate fully with the royal commission

P.S.

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