

YAO SOUCHOU

Wawasan 2020:
*At the End of the Day
Even Art is Not Important*

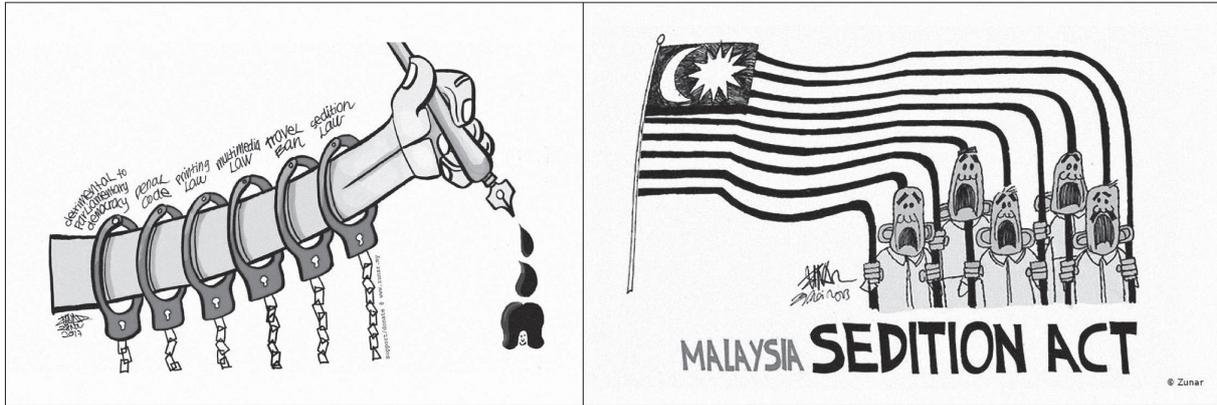


The attempt was as banal as it was futile: another effort by the Malaysian authorities to impose censorship upon an artist. Over several decades, Ahmad Fuad Osman's art practice has dealt with ethnic identity, national memory and particularly, government abuse of power. Acclaimed as one of the most prominent artists working in Malaysia today, his engaging and sophisticated art has been exhibited recently at the 2016 Singapore Biennale: *An Atlas of Mirrors* and the 2019 Sharjah Biennial: *Leaving the Echo Chamber*. Malaysia was ready to acknowledge the achievements of one of its proud sons when the Balai Seni Negara (National Art Gallery of Malaysia) gave him a mid-career exhibition in October 2019, which he ironically titled *At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important (1990-2019)*. The exhibition consisted of a variety of media – painting, installation and photography, selected and approved by the Bali. On 21 January, 2020, three months into the exhibition, Osman was informed that four of his works would be withdrawn following a complaint from a Gallery Board member.

The works in question were *Untitled* (2012), posters of Anwar Ibrahim with a black eye, a reference to his assault by the Inspector General of Police while in detention before his sodomy trial in 1988; *Dreaming of Being A Somebody Afraid of Being A Nobody* (2019), portraits of Mohamed Azmin, Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim, key figures in the struggle for power that led to the collapse of the reformist government that came to power after the 2018 general election; *Imitating the Mountain* (2004), a painting of a naked man lying on his back against the backdrop of a mountain, and *Mak Bapak Borek, Anak Cucu Cicit Pun Rintik* (2015-18), an installation of overweight white ceramic pigs sited before a gold-plated rock. The artist called the censorship "arbitrary, unjustified and an abuse of institutional power."¹ In response, the Balai Director, as an attempt to out-guess the views of some in the public who might find the artworks culturally offensive and derogatory, offered the explanation, "The role of this gallery is a government-funded institutional gallery and has to operate within its norms and order."² The nakedness of the male figure (his pubic hair showing) and the (presence of) pigs are indecencies to conservative Muslims, while Anwar, with his checkered political history, and Mahathir, the Prime Minister of the coalition government which at that time was on the verge of collapsing, had powerful political interests directed against them.

Whatever the reasons, censorship of the arts has been a common occurrence in Malaysia. Before Osman there was the extended situation of the political cartoonist Zunar (Zulkiflee Anwar Haque), who since 2004 had been subject to raids and arrests for railing against the tyranny and corruption of the Malaysian government. His books banned, he was eventually charged for sedition for criticising the then Prime Minister Najib Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, of corruption.³ Ahmad Fuad Osman fared better. After public protests and denouncement by colleague artists, the Balai reversed its decision and restored the four works within the exhibition. But the point had been made. Official action against political art was normalised.

The reformist government that won the 2018 general election, ending the ruling Barisan National coalition's six-decade long monopoly of power since independence in 1957, had shown signs of relaxing official oppression on civil liberties of which Zunar was a beneficiary when charges against him were dropped. But people were cautious, as those repressive laws remained, most noticeably the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act which prescribes severe punishment, including the death penalty, for offences against public order and security. The new government might have been in place, but the laws and traditional political allegiances persisted. The exhibition *At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important (1990-2019)* had to negotiate this uncertain territory, with a somewhat predictable result.



When this government, Mahathir’s coalition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) fell in 2020, less than two years after winning the election, it ended a grand social experiment. The stillbirth of multi-ethnic intercourse at the official and national level was heart-felt and tragic. Its rise and fall involved complex manoeuvres of the political parties, in which the ‘grand old man’ of Malaysian politics, Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, had played a crucial part. Indeed, 2020 marks one of the most critical points in Malaysian politics since independence. It saw the end of the first truly multiracial government in Malaysia, and it witnessed the demise of Mahathir as a political figure of influence. In 1991, as the country’s fourth Prime Minister, he had announced the plan of *Wawasan 2020*, or Vision 2020, which was to transform Malaysia into a modern First World nation. History has made its judgement. Not only that his coalition government failed to hold on, but the ambitious agendas of *Wawasan 2020* were shown to be a failure, a fantasy of an obsessive and charismatic political leader.

For those in Malaysia, there have been two Mahathirs. There was the Mahathir who held political office from 1981 to 2003, and there was the one who, during the 2018 election, rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the scandal-ridden government of Najib Razak. Both Mahathirs were leaders of record-making duration: one for longevity, twenty-two years; the other for brevity, for just less than two years. Mahathir’s first prime ministership is remembered for its energy and dynamism, and the prosperity the country enjoyed under his watch. For all his achievements though, he carried over the racist policies of earlier governments and consolidated many of their repressive measures. But economic growth and national pride had made him in many people’s eyes a memorable political leader. As for the latter Mahathir, there had been much blustering from all quarters.

When he took office, the foreign press tagged him the oldest prime minister in the world; many Malaysians saw him as coming out of retirement to lead a coalition in order to defeat the much-detested Najib and his cronies. There were good stories associated with the second Mahathir. Maybe he did save the nation from Najib, and the voters, exhausted by Najib’s greed and scandals, were prepared to forgive Mahathir’s own misdeeds during his previous time in office. Now that he is no longer in power and his government has fallen apart, how do we evaluate his legacy? Whether or not *Wawasan 2020* had realised its lofty goals, Mahathir had laid the foundation of a modern industrialised economy, now dominated by manufacturing and services rather than primary produce, with only about eleven per cent of the people employed in agriculture.⁴

The Malaysian economy is heavily dependent on foreign investment, and relies on exports. Regarding its society, people in the rural areas and plantations remain poor, and a true Malaysian national identity has yet to emerge. All this places shame on a man who sees himself as a national unifier. For through *Wawasan 2020*, Mahathir had articulated nothing less than a total transformation of Malaysian society, not only the economy. This transformation entailed nine goals, or challenges:

Challenge 1: Establishing a united Malaysian nation made up of one Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian Race)

Challenge 2: Creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society

Challenge 3: Fostering and developing a mature democratic society

Challenge 4: Establishing a fully moral and ethical society

Challenge 5: Establishing a matured liberal and tolerant society

Challenge 6: Establishing a scientific and progressive society

Challenge 7: Establishing a fully caring society

Challenge 8: Ensuring an economically just society, in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation

*Challenge 9: Establishing a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.*⁵

A moral and just society, burnished by scientific and progressive ideas, a liberal and tolerant nation built on equal citizenship, an economy of fair and equitable distribution: with these goals Mahathir had himself transformed from a medical doctor to an economist, then a social reformer. As it is now 2020, the verdict is these goals are mostly unfulfilled except, it may be argued, except for the economy, which has been bravely spluttering along since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and the Global Financial Crisis which followed a decade later.

But this is hindsight. The future did not look like that in the 1980s and 1990s when Mahathir was in office. Most Malaysians eagerly embraced the agendas. There had been calls for national integration before; every government had ethnic harmony and good citizenship in its policies. But none had expressed this vision with such clarity and passion as Mahathir. The idea of “Bangsa Malaysia” (Malaysian Nation), Malaysians as a single ‘race’, was bold and socially intrepid. Few knew how it would be realised though. Nonetheless, it encouraged the thought no one had dared to contemplate before: that the government would dilute, or even repeal pro-Malay racial discrimination put in place at the time of independence, and hardened by communal riots following the 1969 election when the ethnic Chinese-based opposition made significant gains and threatened the ruling Alliance coalition. *Wawasan 2020* struck a chord in many people, perhaps more the non-Malays. It was something people wanted to hear, but was never forthcoming.

Mahathir’s personality and charisma helped to sell the boldness of his vision. There was also the economy. Until the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the Malaysian economy grew at eight per cent per annum, one of the highest in the world. It had become the world’s thirteenth largest economy, and per capita income rose from US\$2,255 in 1990 to US\$3,908 in 1995.⁶ It was a prosperous time, people felt financially secure and went in droves to the shopping malls that sprung up one after another. The economic cake was being shared too, so it appeared. With money in their pockets, people put aside the racial antagonism that had always plagued the nation.



From a global perspective, Mahathir made his mark by championing an anti-West position, as an expression of postcolonial pride and self-interest. Unlike his deputy Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir was less a globalist than an economic nationalist. He directed government procurement away from Western sources—the United States, the UK and the EU—towards Japan, Korea and Taiwan. His Look East Policy was both economic and cultural. Japan became the main source of foreign capital that financed the country’s industrialisation, and Mitsubishi was the major partner in producing the Malaysian car Proton.⁷ Culturally, he believed the East (he meant Japan and Korea), not the decadent West, was of greater relevance in fostering industrial discipline, hard work and social consensus. In the so-called Asian Values debate he advocated with Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and South Korean President Park Chung Hee, that Asian traditions were morally-centred and collectivist as opposed to Western democratic values, implying that, after centuries of colonial rule, it was time for Asia to take control of its own destiny.

On 20 November, 1993, US President Clinton convened the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference (APEC) in Seattle. The historic session was attended by thirteen leaders of Pacific Rim nations: Jiang Zemin, President of the People’s Republic of China; Paul Keating, the Australian Prime Minister; Indonesian President Suharto; South Korean President Kim Young Sam; Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa; the Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah; New Zealand Prime Minister James Bolger; Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, and officials from Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁸ The otherwise pleasant event was marred by the Malaysian leader’s absence—he had refused the invitation and did not attend (his call for an ‘Asians-only’ trading group had been met with a cool response), with Paul Keating famously describing Mahathir’s dissent as “recalcitrant”. In response, Mahathir accused Australia of “talk[ing] down to Asia—it tells the Asians how to behave themselves, even when the Australians themselves are not very well behaved,”⁹ while his government proposed a ‘Buy Australia Last’ campaign. Mahathir’s contrariness followed the flap between Australia and Malaysia two years prior, when the Australian government was forced to apologise to Malaysia over the television soap opera, *Embassy* (1990-92), which portrayed scandal-ridden Ragaan, a fictional Southeast Asian country that bore a strong resemblance to Malaysia.

If this was seen as an anti-West gesture, Mahathir was equally fractious with the leader of neighbouring Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Both were ambitious and politically ruthless. Needled by their policy differences—for instance, Singapore’s friendly relationship with Israel whose self-defence force provided the model for Singapore’s own SDF—Mahathir once remarked, “The fact remains that [Lee] is a mayor of Singapore. This is something he doesn’t like. He wants to be big, you see, and he feels that we took away his opportunity to lead a real country.”¹⁰ That “real country” was, of course, Malaysia. Singapore had been a part of Malaysia since 1963, but the expulsion from the Federation two years later aborted Lee’s dream of winning an election and becoming its Prime Minister; so it was implied.

All this felt like public performance. But for Malaysians, something was more critical domestically: Mahathir’s tribalism that favoured his own community, the Malays. When he was sworn in as Prime Minister in July 1981, he inherited the New Economic Policy (NEP), a set of official measures put in place after the 1969 race riots to strengthen the economic positions of the *bumiputera* (“son of the earth”) Malays, and other indigenous communities. Mahathir strengthened the NEP, and set about to increase Malay corporate ownership through privatisation. The transfer of utility, telecommunications and other government enterprises was designed to create Malay capitalists and professionals, long dominated by the ethnic Chinese and Indians. While it provided opportunities for Malays linked to the government, privatisation took place often without open, competitive tender, leading to corruption that benefited Mahathir’s own associates, among them major Chinese players.

Mahathir was astute enough also to recognise that the transfer of wealth had to involve changes to Malay culture and identity. Towards this end, and to facilitate efficient governance, he was prepared to intervene in one of the pillars of Malayness: traditional royalty. Malaysia has a system of constitutional monarchy. Each state is ruled by a sultan (or in two states a Raja and Yang di-Pertuan Besar), of which the hereditary sultans of the nine Malay states, the King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong), is elected once every five years. The King is also the head of Islam in Malaysia, and he appoints the chief Mufti of each state. After an election, the King appoints the Prime Minister who holds a majority in the lower house of Parliament, the Dewan Rakyat. The King’s role is primarily formal and ceremonial. However, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is given the power of royal assent to the passing of parliamentary bills. The original Constitution imposed no time limit for the King to give royal assent, and theoretically a bill could be shuffled between the parliament and the palace indefinitely and impede the government’s effort to turn it into legislation.

In 1983, the post of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong was to be rotated and the two candidates were Idris Shah II Sultan of Perak and Sultan Iskandar of Johor. Both had the reputation of interfering in the affairs in their own states: Sultan Iskandar had a few years earlier been charged with manslaughter for shooting a trespasser.¹¹ Mahathir was unhappy with the two candidates. To limit the new Agong’s power over his government, Mahathir initiated amendments to the Constitution, under which, in the event of the Agong’s failure to give royal assent within fifteen days, the bill in question would be considered passed and become law. In addition, the Prime Minister, not the Agong, would have power to declare a state of emergency. When the Agong and Sultans refused to give consent to these amendments, Mahathir engineered demonstrations to seek public support through a media campaign. The crisis was resolved in a compromise that favoured the government. Under the Article 66 (4A) of the Constitution, His Majesty could object to a bill and delay royal assent for thirty days, after that the government could bypass the King in the legislative process.¹²

While Mahathir struggled with this constitutional crisis, there was accompanying racial tension which led to a government crackdown on political dissent. First was disunity within UMNO (the United Malays National Organisation, Malaysia's biggest and main national political party, the founding member of the Barisan Nasional coalition which had ruled since independence in 1957). The challenge to Mahathir's chairmanship resulted in the splitting of UMNO into two groups: one led by him, the other by prominent Malay figures including Mahathir's former deputy, Musa Hitam. Mahathir however, won the challenge to his chairmanship with a narrow margin. Another crisis facing the government was opposition to the decision to appoint non-Mandarin speaking supervisors to Chinese-medium primary schools. The Chinese community and its leaders saw this as an attempt to thwart the Chinese language usage in schools, as the supervisors would communicate with teachers and pupils in Malay or English only. On 11 October 1987, a crowd of some 2,000 protesters gathered in the city, among them the chairman of Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a partner in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition; the leader of Democratic Action Party (DAP) and figures from other Chinese-based opposition parties. The subsequent meeting called for a three-day boycott of Chinese schools—though it was later abandoned when the government promised to resolve the issue. Nonetheless, the boycott quickly invited a counter rally organised by the UMNO Youth, the radical wing of the dominant Malay party. On 17 October, some 10,000 government supporters held a demonstration at a sports stadium in Kuala Lumpur, condemning the MCA for colluding with the Chinese educationists and opposition parties. Besides Mahathir, two figures in the crisis would play a prominent role in the 2018 election and the subsequent political drama: Najib Razak, the then head of UMNO Youth, and Anwar Ibrahim, the Education Minister in Mahathir's cabinet. True to form, Najib had during the rally promised to soak a Kris—a traditional Malay dagger—in Chinese blood. Next day, on 18 October, a Malay soldier ran amok killing a man and injuring two others in Jalan Chow Kit, an area of Chinese and Malay businesses and residents. Many shops in the city were closed, fearing a repeat of the 13 May, 1969 race riots between Malays, Chinese and Indians which resulted in hundreds of deaths, looting and arson.¹³

Subsequent events moved quickly. On 27 October, Mahathir launched Operation Lalang,¹⁴ announcing that the crackdown was necessary to defuse racial tensions which had reached "dangerous proportions" and that the country was in the midst of an economic recession and high unemployment, so could not afford racial riots. Altogether 106 people were arrested under the Internal Security Act, under which a person could be detained indefinitely without trial. Among the detainees were DAP secretary general and deputy chairman, opposition politicians, leaders of the Chinese education movement, NGO activists, intellectuals, students, artists, scientists and others. Operation Lalang also brought into detention three members of the team that opposed his UMNO chairmanship. Clearly, the crackdown was Mahathir's show of force against his opponents, including those with his own party. It was a devastating suppression of political dissent and civil liberty. Of those arrested, most were released while forty-nine served a two-year detention without being charged; some alleged they had been tortured during imprisonment.

Following the arrests, the right to public assembly was restricted. The law prohibited rallies for elections, public lectures and general meetings by political parties without a police permit. Additionally, the Home Ministry withdrew the publishing licences of the English (*The Star* and *Sunday Star*) and Chinese newspapers (*Sin Chew Jit Poh*)—and a Malay paper (*Watan*)—accusing them of reporting views unfavourable to the government. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first Prime Minister, in writing for *The Star* commented, "we are on the road to dictatorship."¹⁵ The press

never regained their former spirit of liberal critique, mild even before the government crackdown. The press and the media, as they still do today, fall under the Printing Presses and Publications Act which was amended to require newspapers and publishers to renew their licences annually. A new offence of “maliciously publishing false news” was added to the Act. The requirement of annual application of licences was later withdrawn, but the government retained “absolute discretion” over the granting of such permits.¹⁶

Then there was Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir’s deputy and Finance Minister. A younger man with strong Islamic credentials, Anwar appeared to advocate loosening of the laws against civil liberty. His response to the Asian Financial Crisis had been to follow the sway of global markets, and to align himself with advice of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. His relationship with Mahathir worsened when the Prime Minister abandoned the tight monetary and fiscal restrictions the IMF had favoured. As Mahathir took control of economic policy, Anwar was marginalised. Within UMNO, Anwar’s supporters attacked Mahathir for his slowness in combating corruption. In September 1998, Anwar was dismissed from the cabinet, and from UMNO. Beside the policy differences between the two men, there was rumour of Anwar’s sexual misconduct. As public support for him grew, Anwar was arrested under the Internal Security Act.

Thus begins the sorry tale of Anwar’s fall. Four charges of corruption were laid against him. He was alleged to have abused his power by directing the police to intimidate people who had accused him of committing sodomy. Mahathir told the press that he was “convinced” of Anwar’s guilt. In April 1999, Anwar was found guilty of corruption and given six-years imprisonment. In a trial shortly after, he was given a nine-year sentence on a conviction of sodomy, though this was later overturned on appeal. Later, Najib too saw Anwar as a threat and continued to persecute him. In 2015, Anwar was brought before the court for a second sodomy charge, and received a sentence of five-years imprisonment. Following the victory of the opposition coalition in the 2018 general election, Anwar was free after being pardoned by the King.¹⁷

Mahathir’s years in power had been a story of invidious political manoeuvres and machination. However, what took place – the repression of civic liberties, the struggle within UMNO, the imprisonment of Anwar – make us forget the larger picture. *Wawasan 2020* had drawn up a map for a more equitable future for Malaysians. In truth, the drumbeat of *bumiputra* special rights was toned down but not silenced. Mahathir remained a champion of Malay supremacy, and this was to play out in the demise of the government he briefly led from 2018 to 2020.

The 1971 National Culture Policy was formulated in an effort to appease the Malay supremacists after the 1969 race riots, and all subsequent governments have followed it *tout court*. It states: “1. The National Culture must be based on the indigenous (Malay) culture 2. Suitable elements from the other cultures may be accepted as part of the national culture 3. Islam is a major component in the moulding of the National Culture.”¹⁸ Islam and Malay culture were made the nation’s foundation (though, multiculturalism was given a nod of approval), the justification being that Malays are indigenous people and their religion, language and culture would be rightly made the cornerstone of national identity. However, this posed a significant contradiction in a modern nation-state that formally guarantees equal rights for all citizens. Every government since has had to enact this double act. As the *bumiputera* policy favoured the Malays, the minority communities – the Chinese and

Indians—still needed to be mollified; their interests could not be sacrificed for the sake of national unity. To manage the contradiction, the government relied heavily upon the economy. As evident during the Mahathir years, an expanding economy would spread the prosperity and mitigate the financial inequality and moral decrepitude of the race-based policy. The economy became the key to nation-building. As one analyst writes, “Meeting the aspirations of both Malays and non-Malays meant that political legitimation and economic performance had become two sides of the same coin.”¹⁹ The economy aside, Mahathir understood that to safeguard Malay rights and privileges “invariably means preserving and defending the status of Islam.”²⁰ When he took office in July 1981, the Islamic resurgence was at its height, following the Iranian Revolution and the mujahideen insurgency against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. However, his approach to Islamisation carried a significant modern twist. He wanted an Islam that is a marriage of piety and industrial work ethics in order “to underscore the modernisation of Malaysia.”²¹ He had in mind a modern Malay race, pious and imbued with the culture of hard work and industrial discipline—like the non-Malays, principally the ethnic Chinese. A champion of Malay Supremacy, he aimed to reshape and modernise Malay identity and the institutions that defined it. It was a delicate and risky double-move.

The May 2018 general election was remarkable, even miraculous, on a number of scores. The first is the massive losses of the UMNO-led coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) which had dominated Malaysian politics for over sixty years. After a night of ballot counting, the tally showed the opposition Pakatan Harapan, together with an allied party in Sabah, had won one hundred and twenty-one seats, against BN’s seventy-nine seats. The challenger had safely crossed the threshold to form government. Pakatan Harapan consisted of Bersatu, Malaysian United Indigenous Party, People’s Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and National Trust Party (AMANAH). Their constituents varied: Bersatu is pro-Malay and led by Mahathir and disaffected UMNO ex-members; PKR is reformist and multiracial, the party of Anwar; DAP formed in 1965, is multiracial and under ethnic Chinese and Indian leadership; and AMANAH, of reformist Islamists whose leaders had broken ranks with the orthodox Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS. As a coalition Pakatan Harapan is in name and in agenda multi-ethnic and progressive. This, as much as its opposition to Barisan Nasional, had been its electoral appeal.

After the swearing in, the new government cabinet included Mahathir as Prime Minister; Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Anwar’s wife and leader of PKY) as deputy PM, with Anwar to take over the role of Prime Minister within two years; the post of Finance Minister went an ethnic Chinese; the Attorney General was an ethnic Indian. One would have to be a Malaysian citizen to register how radical all this was. The election, a tsunami loss for UMNO, had heralded a government filled with traditionalists and reform-minded Malays and middle-class professionals, including women. Mahathir was at the time ninety-two years old, he had left retirement to take the helm of a splintered opposition. He had made it clear that the election was “personal”, vowed to take down Najib Razak, in power since 2009.²² Najib was once Mahathir’s protege whom he had groomed to take up office. But Najib’s performance had been lacklustre, dogged by allegations of corruption (along with alleged links to the 2006 murder of a Mongolian model associated to a close associate), with countries including the US and Singapore investigating the US\$4.5 billion missing from 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a state investment fund.²³ The US Justice Department declared that some US\$30 million from the fund was used to buy jewellery for Najib’s wife.²⁴ To bring down his “corrupt protégé”, Mahathir had formed Bersatu and joined the opposition.

Wawasan 2020: At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important



When the Pakatan Harapan government fell apart less than two year later in February 2020, there was much soul searching amongst Malaysians. Had the appointment of a Chinese Finance Minister and an ethnic Indian as Attorney General been too radical? Were the Malays threatened, fearing that their rights and privileges would be compromised under the new government? Was it due to the failure of Mahathir's leadership and the struggle within Pakatan Harapan?

In a way, Mahathir was an unlikely choice to lead. But pragmatism prevailed. For he had his own share of corruption and other scandals during his twenty-two-years in power, and some of his coalition partners had suffered arrests and imprisonment by his government. Nonetheless, the Pakatan Harapan coalition believed, with Anwar in prison, it could not capture the Malay votes without Mahathir. On his part, Mahathir had hoped he would retake power and clean up UMNO and realise some of the agendas he outlined in his *Wawasan 2020* plan. Throughout all this, he remained a Malay nationalist; his disaffection had been with UMNO and its backward thinking and corrupt elite – not with the party itself. It was a fact few in the coalition were prepared to contemplate at the time.

There was a good deal of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.²⁵ The collapse of the government was riven by rumour and conspiracy. In the final analysis, there are several considerations – Mahathir was unsure if his successor would carry on his agenda, particularly reforming UMNO – why he procrastinated in announcing the date of Anwar's takeover. Two decades after his first premiership, as one commentator explains, Mahathir had held onto his vision of removing “the kleptocrats within UMNO” and returning the country “back in the hands of those who genuinely support the agenda to protect and develop the Malay bourgeoisie.”²⁶ The Anwar factor haunted him still, as did what he had proposed in *Wawasan 2020*. Looking at the Pakatan Harapan government, it is remarkable how its multiracial, reformist aims had echoed Mahathir's obsessions over the years. Whatever he had in mind was to be achieved within a Malay Supremacist framework. In his second premiership,

*(Mahathir) is apprehensive that the Pakatan Harapan leaders – Lim Guan Eng and Anwar Ibrahim – [are] too cosy with Chinese capital and foreign investors. He needed to pass the government to a Malay majority government which would be committed to continuing the 'Malay Agenda'. This is why he brought in MPs from UMNO to bolster Bersatu, and why he cozied up with UMNO and PAS.*²⁷

In subterfuge against subterfuge, Mahathir the champion of Malay Ascendancy had played his role, the Malay voters' “perception was that [Pakatan Harapan] is committed to ‘meritocracy’, trimming subsidies to poorer sectors, promoting market based solutions and downsising the public sector.”²⁸ They may have disliked Najib, but they quickly reevaluated the situation and readjusted their allegiances. Without Malay support, which Mahathir's opponents were quick to exploit, Pakatan Harapan's legitimacy and political base suffered significantly. 2020 is a significantly different era to that of the 1980s and 1990s. Mahathir had enjoyed enormous power and popularity, but he now faced a slowing economy, rising costs of living and high unemployment. The hatred for Najib had united the voters – Malay, Chinese and Indian alike. Talking to informants, it is complicated to describe the disillusionment and sense of betrayal. Everything – social justice and equality, a truly multiracial Malaysia – about the Pakatan Harapan government had been over-ambitious. In some ways it echoed *Wawasan 2020*. For many Malaysians, the idea of the government as a force of betterment for all citizens was shown to be a fantasy: this may well be Mahathir's ultimate legacy.

Looking back to the censorship of Ahmad Fuad Osman's artworks it felt like business as usual. *Wawasan 2020* was silent on the arts, but it had promised a "psychologically liberated" and "mature democratic society". Ever since independence the state had suppressed the media and artistic expression, and during the Mahathir years films like *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) were banned for their depiction of violence, as was *Schindler's List* (1993) for its sympathetic rendering of the Jews and The Holocaust.²⁹ So the National Art Gallery's dealing with Osman's art is nothing new. One may well ask: aren't free, vibrant, artistic practices a crucial aid to the making of a modern and progressive society Mahathir had in mind?

Ahmad Fuad Osman's work for the 2019 Sharjah Biennial was the *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* (2016-ongoing),³⁰ a mixed-media installation including videos, archival material, photographs and ancient maps. *Enrique de Malacca* is best described as an erasure of historical memory through the resurrection of the new and the neglected. At the Biennial articles of 'evidence' that debunk an enduring myth were hung on the wall, displayed in glass cabinets, and streamed over headphones; and still more, embodied in the sculpted figure of a half-squatting man, his eyes looking ahead like a ship captain scanning the sea for the horizon. This figure dominates the room, his vision ties the elements—the maps, the tools and weapons, the prints and paintings, the documents—that constitute the project into a single web of significance.

Who was Enrique de Malacca? What was the myth that his character stands against? Osman 'discovered' him in the novel *Panglima Awang (Commandant Awang)* (1957) by the Singaporean writer Harun Aminurrashid.³¹ The novel introduces an alternative account of the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the world. Magellan died in Mactan Island, in the Philippines, in 1521. A myth emerged that it was Enrique, the Portuguese captain's slave and guide, who completed the voyage. Enrique was from the Indonesian archipelago, and Magellan was the conqueror of Malacca. This became the thrust of Osman's project: to reconstruct a mytho-history about the first circumnavigation of the world from the view of Maritime Southeast Asia—Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia.³² In this context, whether Enrique is real or a fiction is less important than his representation of a shared history and identity in the region. And this shared history and identity is superimposed on the conventional narrative of Magellan's heroic voyage that opened the door to European conquest of the New World. The result is a postcolonial rewriting of the history of Southeast Asia. In this revision, the European role is played down, and so is the possible claim of the Nusantara sailor-explorer as belonging to any of the Southeast Asian maritime nations. *Panglima Awang*, based little on historical evidence, was "meant to provide imaginative support to the Malay struggle for independence as well as the post-independent nation-building in Malaysia."³³ But the artist is adamant that Enrique does not 'belong' to one nation alone, but to all nations of the Southeast Asian sea lanes. The *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* has shifted from a sole 'Malaysia focus' and given the Magellan-Enrique voyage a postcolonial and regional tint. Ahmad Fuad Osman is no Malay racialist.

The strength of the *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* lies in its handling of history and collective memory, and its denying of its use for nationalist aims. For someone like Mahathir, his anti-West, postcolonial outrage always ended up in hoisting a nationalist, pro-Malay position. Osman has a different, more sophisticated take. Reflecting on the 2020 National Art Gallery exhibition, it is difficult to pin it down in terms of a single discursive strategy. Like all brilliant artwork, it encourages interpretive freedom. The pigs (of *Mak Bapak Borek, Anak Cucu Cicit Pun Rintik*) circumnavigating the gold rock: only the crudest cultural chauvinist might read it as an attack on

a wealth-loving community – perhaps the Chinese? And it was left to the Islamic zealots to incite resentment and religious sensitivity that inevitably led to censorship. As to the photographs of Mahathir and Anwar, it may be argued that they have to feature in a contemporary artwork simply because they were key figures in a momentous time in the nation’s history. The artist’s approach may be deconstructive, but the slashing and the muted tone of the portraits reins in the sense of approval the artist may have of his subjects. The controversy would have been much of nothingness in a different context. But the irony is that it is given to the professional curators and gallery officials to take up the role of Islamicists and UMNO racialists to force a singular meaning, to coerce an ideological and anti-Islamic intent onto the artwork and the exhibition itself.

In example and style, one recognises this had been Mahathir’s approach to governance during his two decades in power. There was suppression of political dissent and censorship of films and publications. However, it is safe to think these measures were not so much removed from *Wawasan 2020* as imbedded in its agendas. The power of *Wawasan 2020* lies in its over-promises and no less in its concealment. Like the *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project*, *Wawasan 2020* is mytho-realism, a narrative of the nationalist fiction of race. All the grand pronouncement of Bangsa Malaysia and the creating of a just, equitable society built on an advanced economy: the worm of racial inequality and Malay Supremacy ate away at its core. Race baiting had brought Mahathir power. For all his efforts to modernise Malay culture and identity, communalism had driven him in his two premierships. The result has been costly; the vacuousness of his political ambitions had the effect of destroying the hope of reform, of causing distrust in parliamentary politics, and of impeding the artistic expression of one as astute as the maker of the *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* and the emblematic work in the 2019 National Art Gallery exhibition, *At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important*.

Notes

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⁴ ‘Economy of Malaysia’; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Malaysia; accessed 29 May 2020

⁵ ‘Wawasan 2020’; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wawasan_2020; accessed 4 June 2020

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⁷ Michio Kimura, ‘Foreign direct investment in Malaysia’, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1991, pp. 180-195

⁸ Walt Crowley, ‘President Clinton convenes APEC summit on Blake Island on November 20, 1993’; <https://www.historylink.org/File/5333>; accessed 4 June 2020

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- ¹⁴ Lalang is a type of weed, and so the meaning was clear, a "weeding operation"
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- ³⁰ Also shown at the 2016 Singapore Biennale: *An Atlas of Mirrors*
- ³¹ Harun Aminurrashid, *Panglima Awang*, Singapore: Pustaka Melayu, 1957
- ³² See the 2019 Sharjah Biennial website; <https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2019/calligraphy-square/calligraphy-museum/ahmad-fuad-osman>; accessed 3 June, 2020. The reading of the artwork is mine
- ³³ 'About the Memorial Project'; <https://www.enriquedemalacca.com/about.html>; accessed 4 June 2020