Mahathir bin Mohamad Speaks of the ‘New Malaysia’

At 93, he is the oldest head of state in the world, the patron saint of comebacks. What is remarkable is that Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad was the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003. He retired to make way for his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. In May 2018, the coalition headed by Mahathir won 122 out of 222 seats. This narrow victory ensured that he became Prime Minister for the second time in Malaysia’s history.

Mahathir is widely credited as the architect of modernization in his country. His long tenure in government brought the stability needed for the economic transformation. In a recent interview he was alert, well spoken, and looked sprightly and much younger than his age suggests. There is speculation that he may even run again in the next elections!

At the Asia Society in New York Mahathir spoke of his vision for a ‘New Malaysia.’ The interviewer was Kevin Rudd, the president of the Asia Policy Institute, and a former Prime Minister of Australia. Mahathir said that he resigned after fifty years in politics to give way to a younger generation. Some people called him a dictator ‘but I don’t know of many dictators that have resigned.’

He continued, ‘having been criticized by the opposition for 61 years they decided that they should choose me as their leader in the last election. They said that he never thought that his coalition was going to win but now that they have won they have to fulfill all the things that they put into their manifesto. Mahathir said that the transition of power was relatively smooth. The opposition tried to make alliances with other parties, including an Islamic party, with the idea of setting up an Islamic Republic but this did not work. Why did this fail? Mahathir said that Malaysians are pragmatic people. They do not like radical changes. The new government is called Co-Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia.

of the principal lenders is China and there are plans to renegotiate the agreements with that country. The East Coast Railway would have cost 55 billion ringgit; four ringgits are equivalent to one US dollar. The high-speed rail was also estimated to cost billions and was not seen as necessary since it would not save much traveling time. The new government is negotiating to either terminate the projects or to make them smaller. This would lift a great burden from Malaysia.

The borrowing by the previous government amounted to one trillion Malaysian ringgits. Mahathir said the most Malaysians could not grapple with the idea of one trillion. In dealing with the administrative machinery, he said that separation of powers is normal in a democracy, but in the previous government ‘the administrative organization did not follow the rules governing separation. It was subverted and became part of that government and members were carrying out party instructions. This has to change as there will be new faces to carry out administrative duties; we need professional to manage industries. The previous government had a slogan that ‘Cash is King’ that condoned bribery and corruption. Mahathir said the Coalition has reverted to democracy and the rule of law. The rule of law can be time consuming; it requires providing evidence in a court of law and having due process but it is worthwhile. The new government is confiscating property as a means of restitution. Mahathir says that the New Malaysia is business friendly and would welcome foreign investment. He has promised political stability that would encourage investment. ‘We will adopt the concept of Malaysia Incorporated,’ he said.

In this climate, the government and the private sector will work closely together. Mahathir’s presentation was bound to elicit questions. He is a controversial figure but he was fearless during his first term in office. How will he respond to questions about his government in his second spell? But first, there was the question about his stamina. What was the secret to his longevity? Mahathir said that, ‘they say I am a weather man’. The secret is, I have had two heart operations, but thankfully, I have not suffered from diseases. I don’t drink or smoke and I watch my diet and do a little bit of exercise. A person must be active and must read to know what is happening in the world.’

As was pointed out, an independent civil service is fundamental to the success of a democracy. What exactly were Mahathir’s plans to strengthen the civil service? He said that as a colony Malaysia took over the structure that was put in place by the British. During his first administration the civil service was independent. This was needed for it to function effectively.

But in the last government the civil service was subservient to the point where it carried out crimes. The reports that were made against Mahathir argued that what they did are ‘against the teachings of Islam and that they claim that it is the Islamic thing to do. To counter them you have to know your religion. You have to tell them that what they are saying is not correct because the Koran says a different thing. We can’t say this is modern times. This wouldn’t go down well with Muslims. But when we point out to Malaysians that what the Muslim Party is saying is contrary to the Koran then we are accepted. We have been able to reduce the support for the Islamic Party.’

What about Malaysia’s policy with its neighbors? Mahathir said Singapore has Malaysians living in that country, but there are issues to settle. They include the price of raw water; Malaysia is negotiating for a better price. Mahathir also points out that his country will continue to play a role in ASEAN.

The population of the ASEAN countries number 600 million. If countries can be opened up to trade ASEAN will grow. It is a peaceful regional organization and trade between members is the key to growth.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.