

Patrick Lawrence

## **‘Civilisation is no longer the norm’**

The 18 truths of Mahathir bin Mohamad

*“We consider ourselves civilised, being creatures of high moral values. We are more human and humane. But can we say we are still civilised now? Over the last three decades especially, we have destroyed most of the ethical values that we had built up.”*

It takes a special sort of centenarian to come out with remarks as pithy as these, as close to the bone of truth. But Mahathir bin Mohamad, whatever one may think of him—and the possibilities are panoramic, from praiseworthy to despicable—has always been a special sort of person. Mahathir, a long-serving prime minister of Malaysia, as outspoken a political figure as you will find in our time, turned 100 on 10 July. And, true to form, he has some blunt things to say to humanity.

Mahathir published “The collapse of civilisation” two days after his birthday via his social media account on “X.” The piece comprises 18 numbered observations, most just a sentence long. They read like a collection of related *pensées*. This is very like the ever-contentious Mahathir. He has never bothered much with research or evidence in support of his arguments, and he has never been short of these. He makes his point in typically assertive fashion, and one is invited to take it or leave it, applaud it or condemn it, consider the man wise or consider him one or another kind of intellectual oddity.

“The collapse of civilisation” came to me—a little etymology here, if I can bend the term slightly—via George Burchett, whose *People’s Information Bureau*, is a

privately circulated blog he publishes as *P.I.B.* more or less daily. Burchett, who lives along the Vietnamese seashore south of Hanoi, picked it up from John Menadue, who, in turn, has published *Pearls and Irritations*, his blog, for the past dozen years. These two are by nature attentive to others. Burchett is a painter and the son of Wilfred Burchett, the noted war correspondent whose practice it was to report global conflicts—the Korean war, Vietnam, the independence struggles in Portuguese Africa—from what we call “the other side.” Menadue previously served as a diplomat of Ambassador rank in Australia’s foreign service. Between them they have, let’s say, the habit of listening.

I propose we listen, too, and I do so for two reasons.

One, I have long distinguished between the sayable and the unsayable in any given culture or society, the thought being the more we cannot publicly acknowledge the unhealthier are the lives we live. And in these dozen-and-a-half entries—can we call them aphorisms?—Mahathir boldly makes sayable things that, in the way of the unclothed emperor, many of us have very clearly understood these past few years but have forbidden ourselves to articulate.

Two, I do not want to suggest we take Mahathir as any kind of spokesman for the Global South: Too much of his thinking is controversial in the non-West as well as in the West, and in any case I doubt the South would want any single figure to speak for it at this stage of its development. But in my read the good doctor—Mahathir trained as a physician but practiced only briefly in the 1950s—often expresses in sharp-edged versions sentiments shared among non-Western people even when (in their version of the unsayable) they are well short of expressing them.

The Western powers' claim to moral superiority, their hypocrisies in matters to do with human rights, the implicit racism in their foreign policies, America's insistence on its hegemonic dominance: Mahathir, to take an obvious example, has long been a vocal critic of all this. I have no shred of doubt, having passed three decades as a correspondent in the non-West, that these views are widely shared. Mahathir distinguishes himself only by saying what others dare not.

Let us listen to this singular man, then. [Here](#) is the original of Mahathir's piece as published on "X" (where he has 1.3 million followers). And [here](#) is John Menadue's reprint in *Pearls and Irritations*, which I find easier to read typographically. This is a fairly simple composition: Mahathir begins with a recitation of humanity's high ideals and then, at No. 7, turns to all the ways humanity has failed humanity.

No. 1:

*[indent.]*

Something has gone wrong with the world, with human civilisation. For centuries we have been ridding ourselves of barbarism in human society, of injustices, of the oppression of men by men.

*[end indent.]*

No. 3:

*[indent.]*

We have designed laws to ensure justice for all, abolished absolute monarchies and dictatorship, and all kinds of abuses of power.

*[end indent.]*

No. 8:

*[indent.]*

Now we are seeing an orgy of killing. We are seeing genocide being perpetrated before our own eyes. Worse still, the genocide is actually being promoted and defended.

*[end indent.]*

No. 16:

*[indent.]*

I hide my face.

*[end indent.]*

And the last, No. 18:

*[indent.]*

Civilisation is no more the norm.

*[end indent.]*

It is well and good to read “The collapse of civilization” as a centenarian’s birthday message to all who may read it, and one wishes Dr Mahathir a fine 101<sup>st</sup> year. But as the second half of his 18 thoughts indicates, it is the Israelis’ campaign of terror against the Palestinians of Gaza, the Western powers’ disgraceful support of these daily atrocities, and the craven cowardice of the West’s near-total silence that has aroused him to another round of the denunciations familiar to those who have

followed his political career. Is there any doubt whatsoever that he speaks again for the many who, for one or another reason, do not speak?

There is none in my mind.

At last we have a man of the non–West telling us just how disgusted his half of the world is with the Western powers and their Zionist client. At last it is clear that the non–Western world is unlikely ever to forgive either Israel or its sponsors for what they have done and continue to do to the Palestinians who struggle desperately to survive the Israelis’ daily military aggressions and the Zionists’ intent to starve those they consider “human animals.” At last that half of the world not complicit in these crimes against humanity condemns those complicit—and the fraud, altogether, of “Western civilisation.”

■

When Mahathir bin Mohamad was first elected prime minister, in 1981, it was the beginning of a 39–year run that ended (with a 15–year interim out of office but not out of power) in 2020. And it was plain from the first he was to serve as something of a strongman in the fashion then common in Southeast Asia. The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a wonderfully eccentric weekly newsmagazine that is sadly no more, had just named me its Singapore and Malaysia bureau chief. So it was I covered him from his arrival in office, and my view of Mahathir has ever since been ambivalent.

Hussein Onn, Mahathir’s predecessor, had studied law in London and, while he had an authoritarian streak of his own, was a measured leader dedicated to uniting the nation’s disparate populations—Malay, Chinese, Indian—for the common good. Mahathir was by comparison a divisive street fighter—vigorously intolerant of dissent, politically manipulative, given to underhanded attacks on his opponents.

Corruption, a long-running problem in Malaysia, grew rampant during Mahathir's years. He was no friend of the press, not least the foreign correspondents covering Kuala Lumpur.

All this being so, I soon found myself liking Mahathir for things a Western correspondent was supposed to find objectionable and disliking him for things of which I was supposed to write approvingly.

Mahathir was a “modernizer” in the mold of the region's others—Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Suharto in Indonesia, and so on. But his economic strategy was straight out of the neoliberal textbooks. The financial sector and major corporations were always privileged during Mahathir's years. He privatized public services, expressways, and what have you in the fashion prevalent in the West at this time, but financialisation, corporatisation, and privatisation in a nation of Malaysia's state—low per-capita income, underdeveloped industrially, overdependence on resources extraction (tin, rubber, palm oil)—was simply the wrong technology.

This is what you saw back then. As underdeveloped intellectually as they were on the industrial side, the old colonies simply took on the theories handed down to their economists and political scientists. It was like someone wearing a heavy tweed suit 60 miles from the equator. Mahathir made Malaysia modern; he made little progress reducing the social and economic imbalances and inequalities that had lingered since the years Malaysia was Malaya, a British colony.

But he had daring, this precocious PM. And he had a lively animosity toward the West, the British in particular. In an overnight raid on the London Stock Exchange shortly after Mahathir took office, a group of wealthy Malaysian investors wrested majority control of Guthries, an old-line plantation company that symbolized Britain's lingering presence in the economy. A short time later Malaysia cornered

the global tin market in another operation, this one on the London Metal Exchange. These were coordinated interventions; Mahathir was by design beating the old colonials at their own game.

He was looking everywhere he could for ways to break with the West. In the *Review*'s pages I named this policy "Look East," a label that stuck among Malaysians for many years. I admired the project, as well as his animus toward the West, however much I was expected to write critically of both. He was, I think now, in part a descendant of the old Non-Aligned Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and in part a harbinger of the thinking one finds in the BRICS group today—a foot in the past, a foot in the future.

Mahathir was always resolutely Muslim and dedicated to the nation's Malay majority, known as *bumiputras*, who are Muslim and, in his time, disadvantaged village-dwellers no match for the Overseas Chinese in business or for capitalist competition altogether. A decade before he took office he made himself famous with *The Malay Dilemma*, a book so contentiously argumentative in the *bumiputra* cause it was banned in Malaysia when it came out and allowed in bookshops only after he became PM, when it was instantly a must-read.

In it Mahathir argued for a comprehensive reshaping of the economy—a vast affirmative-action program, in effect—intended to make financial and industrial titans out of some *bumis* and bring the majority out of their thatched-roof huts and into the modern economy. This was called the New Economic Policy, and it did not work, in my judgment: It produced a handful of *bumiputra* millionaires and billionaires and a very, very sharp increase in corruption. You are simply not going to get a capitalist political economy to produce equality of the sort Mahathir was looking for.

He finally gave up on the N.E.P. in 1991. But such is not at all the point. This is a man, a very imperfect man, who has spent his political life in search of some form of justice, of equality, of humanity—a man who has long understood the West as an impediment to achieving any of these. And near the end of his life, speaking from the non–West if not precisely for it, he writes, No. 12:

*[indent.]*

I feel ashamed. We should feel ashamed in the eyes of the animals we consider to be wild. We are worse than them.

*[end indent.]*

And then, Nos. 13, 14 and 15:

*[indent.]*

Will we stop?

No. We cannot.

Because the very people who preached the rights of humanity are the ones to destroy our hard-fought civilisation.

*[end indent.]*

24 July 2025