Alor Star, the capital of Kedah state, might have been a sleepy backwater in the early years of last century, but the social distinctions were drawn as sharply there as anywhere in colonial Malaya. Malay royalty and the aristocracy lived in relative splendour in the northern outskirts around the palace. Senior civil servants and the wealthy occupied fine homes closer to the centre. The rest shared the rest, with the poorest finding shelter on the other side of the Kedah River that bisected the town. Mahathir Mohamad was born south of the river.

As Mahathir was to discover, inequality was not confined to owning a colonial house in the best neighbourhood. His father, founder of the government’s first English-medium secondary school in Kedah and a passionate educationist, could not get his daughters into secondary school. Members of the elite were given priority, as they were in almost everything else, from university scholarships to coveted jobs in the Kedah civil service. Although Mahathir obtained the academic distinction that usually won a scholarship for someone with the right pedigree to study abroad and gain professional qualifications, none was forthcoming for him.

British elitism and a Malay sense of hierarchy combined to let people know their place in society. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, son of the Sultan of Kedah and the independent country’s first prime minister, did better than most royals in socializing with fellow citizens, but he never forgot his regal origins. Explaining why he would not have known the young Mahathir, Tunku Abdul Rahman said, “He was a nobody. His father was a subordinate officer in Kedah. I did not mix with his father. We had a club in Kedah, a special club for civil servants, for royalty and so on. They had a subordinate club.”

The discrimination Mahathir’s family suffered because it lacked the necessary socio-economic background and connections was general, not personal. It said much about Mahathir’s strength of character, and the family support he received, that he did not allow it to obstruct a successful career in medicine and politics. Indeed, it made him more determined to succeed,
though memories of the inequities of the system permanently coloured his outlook.

Where the establishment was concerned, Mahathir was a maverick, an “outsider” in the words of Zainuddin Maidin, a journalist-turned-politician and supporter in Kedah.\textsuperscript{2} Mahathir challenged the rules and conventions, whenever they appeared to make no sense, or got in his way. He revelled in being a contrarian, doing what was popularly forbidden. To many others, Mahathir’s youthful experience manifested itself as an inferiority complex that made him fight harder, shout louder, build bigger and remain super-sensitive to any slight or criticism. “I prefer to say he has a big chip on his shoulder,” commented Abdullah Ahmad, a long-time political ally.\textsuperscript{3} Khalid Abdullah, an early business partner and friend for more than half a century, observed with a gentle laugh, “I think he has a little superiority complex.” Khalid quoted an Arab proverb to explain Mahathir’s mentality: “If you see me with one eye, I have no eyes to see you. If you see me with both eyes, I have all my eyes to see you.”\textsuperscript{4}

Eyes wide open, Mahathir focused on politics early. He got hooked while he was still in school and never deviated from his desire to become a politician. Every step he took, including qualifying as a doctor, was meant to enhance his credentials for a political career. He entered the national political arena because he was unhappy with the state of the country and wanted to change it. Most of all, he set out to improve the status of fellow Malays, the country’s predominant ethnic group who, despite their numerical superiority, lagged economically behind the Chinese. He would not become prime minister until the age of 56, after overcoming several serious political obstacles, two potentially fatal. But then he would cling to the post for more than 22 years, almost as long as his three predecessors combined, unceasingly trying to shape a modern nation in his own image.

Although Mahathir was deeply embroiled in the contentious debates that preceded and followed Malaya’s independence in 1957, he was not in the vanguard of the country’s first-generation leaders. He was an early member of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), formed to oppose a specific British colonial arrangement perceived to weaken the position of Malays, which emerged as the country’s premier political party. But UMNO initially was led by members drawn from the traditional aristocracy such as Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister, who was a tunku, or tengku, prince. He was followed by Abdul Razak Hussein and Hussein Onn, both of royal lineage, who became brothers-in-law when they married into the royal family in the southern state of Johore. Mahathir, decidedly a commoner, was an outspoken critic of UMNO policies under Tunku Abdul Rahman, whom he blamed for accepting passively the plight of the Malays.

The youngest of nine children – a tenth had died at birth – Mahathir was born in the family home in Seberang Perak, a semi-rural slum in Alor Star, on 10 July 1925. His father, Mohamad Iskandar, a teacher, had been recruited