

HARD-HITTING words said in a quiet voice — that is the style of Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad.

Some years ago the voice was strident. "When you are outside and have no authority, you have to shout to be heard," he told A. Kadir Jasni of Business Times in an interview last year.

Today, as Number Two in the Cabinet and Umno, Dr. Mahathir has no more need to "shout". But his words remain tough, for he retains his old role of the man who says what needs to be said, which few can or want to say.

In 1969 when he wrote that fateful letter to the Tunku, he was giving voice to the frustrations of a group in Umno over the plight of the Malays as they saw it.

The voice was a trifle harsh, perhaps, and the volume was magnified manifold when somehow the letter got circulated. It was Dr. Mahathir who paid the price — expulsion from the party he had served since his student days.

He took it with fortitude. His loyalty never wavered.

Nor did he appeal to be taken back, even after the top leadership — and the policy — changed and became distinctly more conducive to his return. "I will not crawl back," he said.

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Mahathir — A committed moderate

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By
**ADIBAH
AMIN**

to others while they lived off the profits.

"This, I wish to stress, is not the way to run a business. There is no reason for bumiputras to feel ashamed to work with their hands, as business has always been honoured in any community."

Later in the same month he emphasised the need for a "give-and-take" attitude amongst the communities, "to prevent the demands of one community from being excessive."

He is only too aware of the realities of racial feeling. "Although it would be ideal," said he, "to have a non-communal party like the Gerakan, the fact of life is that many people in the coun-

disagree with him on these and other issues — like his comments on student demonstrations, the MAS strike, and Malaysian unions and their international connections.

What is reassuring, however, is that he does offer arguments to support a decision. Articulate, and with a gift for repartee, he enjoys debates and question-and-answer sessions.

Those who have worked closely with him in the Education Ministry and the Trade and Industry Ministry say that he is a firm believer in and a practitioner of consultation. His decisions are made fairly fast, but not before he has looked at all angles.

Contribution

Umno Youth pressed for his return, the top leadership made a definite gesture, and in 1972 he rejoined the fold on the clear understanding that he was free to express his views so as to make a meaningful contribution.

"I have not changed any of my principles," he said soon after. He added later, "I never was against the Chinese or other non-Malays. I just wanted to correct the imbalance."

In 1974, coming into his first Cabinet post as Education Minister, he told the present writer in an interview: "I want to do my best for all Malaysians."

Now that the Government has done a lot to correct the "imbalance", Dr. Mahathir finds himself telling bumiputras to discard "get-rich-quick" attitudes, and to be self-reliant and less dependent on outside help.

With typical directness he said, in April: "There have been instances where many, after obtaining permits for stalls, left their business

try still feel apprehensive about the positions of their communities."

Balance is what he strives to attain and maintain — a balance necessarily based on political pragmatism, but also taking into account human absolutes like fairness and self-respect.

It has also been Dr. Mahathir's unenviable task to take the bull of emerging religious fanaticism by the horns — at the very real risk of being gored.

In May 1979 he spoke out clear and strong against a group of Muslims who had desecrated several Hindu temples in the country.

"Their actions," he said, "are in conflict with Islamic teachings and can spark racial enmity."

"The group has made use of twisted interpretations of Islamic teachings for the benefit of several of its leaders... The notion they spread is that those who destroy idols in temples will go to Heaven, even if they had earlier committed acts against Islamic teachings.

"They intend to cause racial strife in the country by propagating such

false teachings... When racial trouble breaks out, the group's leaders will benefit politically, and move into positions of influence."

In December that year he advised Malaysians not to be misled by fanatical groups and extremists.

The reason

"Islam does not preach extremism, but moderation," he said. "...It is the Government's policy of moderation which has brought Malaysia through 22 years of independence and made it a land of abundance for all communities."

In April this year, he criticised a group of "so-called intellectuals" who had tried to discourage Malaysian students from continuing their studies because these were "secular and thus not per-

mitted in Islam."

He cited the recent case of 16 undergraduates of local universities who gave up their studies giving this belief as the reason.

Dr. Mahathir proceeded to explain the true Islamic stand on the matter of acquiring knowledge — that Muslims should pursue knowledge in all fields, secular as well as religious.

Race and religion are explosive issues which are favourites with some who seek power, but which many who already have power would prefer to side-step.

It is a measure of Dr. Mahathir's quality as a leader that he meets these issues full on, puts his popularity at stake, and somehow, so far, gets away with it.

While many strongly support him in his stand on these matters, others may just as vehemently

Shift

He is as outspoken on the international scene as on the national. At the 11th special session of the UN General Assembly in New York in August last year, speaking on the "new international economic order" (NIEO), he took developed nations to task for "wasteful consumption" while "some 700 million people in the developing countries suffer from malnourishment..."

He stressed that the developing countries are not "seeking a relationship of charity and dependence" and that their focus "has long shifted from aid to trade".

He criticised the "blatant negativism and inexplicable resentment" of some developed countries towards the NIEO.

He pointed out the interdependence of all nations — developed as well as developing — for prosperity and for survival itself. "The developing countries are not seeking benevolence from the affluent but a state of mutual survival under

conditions of peace and stability."

Early this year, at the Third Islamic Summit Conference, Dr. Mahathir said there was not enough meaningful economic cooperation among members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Islamic leaders should not "delude" themselves into thinking that much had been done. What had gone into this economic cooperation was a "mere drop in the ocean" compared with the total investments in other countries by the Islamic nations. "...It is money from the Islamic world that is propping up the industries of Europe and America..."

Blunt words, but necessary and salutary. Dr. Mahathir is not one to call a spade a gardening implement. If need be, he will call it a rusty old cangkul.

His candour, however, does not seem to have hurt Malaysia's image in the eyes of foreign investors. Quite on the contrary. When Dr. Mahathir took over the Trade and Industry portfolio in early 1978, practically no investment was coming in because the Industrial Coordination Act (ICA) was badly misunderstood.

He went on several trips abroad to convince foreign investors that the ICA was a normal piece of legislation and should be no cause at all for anxiety. He was able to assure them that there was a reasonable guarantee of adequate returns for their investments.

Investment offers have since come in such numbers that Malaysia is in a position to pick and choose.

Dr. Mahathir was born in Kedah on 20 December 1925. His education was first in Malay and then in English. He did medicine

at the University of Malaya, Singapore, from 1949 to 1955. On graduating as a doctor, he joined the Kedah Government as a medical officer, resigning after four years to start his own practice.

He was Secretary of the Kedah Malay Union very early in his twenties. At the university, he was active in the Students' Union and was President of the Muslim Society. At the same time he was a committee member of Umno Kedah.

In 1959 he successfully contested the Kedah State elections. In 1964 he was returned in the Federal elections by the Kota Star Selatan constituency. He was a member of the Umno Supreme Council in 1965-69.

In 1969 he lost the elections and his membership of Umno, in two swift blows. After his return, he was re-elected to the Supreme Council in

1972, appointed a Senator in 1973, and chairman of FIMA also in 1973. In 1974 he was returned unopposed in the Kubang Pasa parliamentary constituency.

At the Umno General Assembly in June 1975, Dr. Mahathir was elected one of three Vice-Presidents. In 1976 he was chosen by Datuk Hussein Onn to be Deputy Prime Minister. In the general elections of 1978 he defeated Halim Arshet of PAS.

Dr. Mahathir's political career has been marked by a sudden eclipse followed by a swift rise. Neither seems to have shaken him unduly.

A seasoned politician, a level-headed thinker, a firm moderate, a natural at human relations, the chances are he will, when the time comes, make a more than decent job of leading this challengingly plural society of ours.