

# On the Mahathir trail

THE RED carpet for the Prime Minister is two different shades of red. Two hundred and fifty feet long, it is ready to be rolled out as his plane stops at the old airport in Penang.

The Protocol Officer is all in a flurry. He tells a State officer and his wife that they have to go to the plane to invite the PM and his wife down. That is the custom. He persuades the Wanfa Umno women from Balik Pulau to join the Datins.

The plane arrives. It is an F-28, painted white and blue. One of the Datin group says, "the plane is old." She's disappointed that the PM did not step out of a gleaming silver contraption.

The PM is dressed in a beige-grey bush jacket. His hair is slicked down slightly, parted to the left, with a bit of grey showing here and there. He comes by and shakes hands. He has a warm handshake.

Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah is dressed in a baju kurung in the 'cekak musang' style. She's wearing a coral set, the

beads carved, with matching dangling earrings, a ring and a brooch. She has a gold link chain bracelet and an exquisite gold and black spiral bangle. She is slim, elegant and composed.

Following close behind are 14 reporters, the television crew, five bodyguards and three people from the Prime Minister's office.

## Speaking

We leave in a motorcade for the bridge site where Dr Mahathir is to off the piling work

for the bridge. It is not as exciting to travel in the motorcade as one would expect.

For one thing, in an airconditioned car towards the back of the motorcade, one cannot hear the sirens of the escort riders. Then the cars are going at a constant 10 miles an hour. The only thing slightly flashy about the procession is that each car has its

emergency blinker light on. "For traffic control," says a seasoned member of the party.

It's hot at the bridge site. And then the speeches begin. There are three speeches before the PM's speech. By this time, the front two rows across the field have emptied. The glare of the sun is too great. All are holding the brochure to shield themselves from the sun. There are dragonflies in the mercilessly blue sky.

The PM speaks. He holds the rostrum with both hands and speaks into the battery of microphones. He looks straight up, but now and again looks down as if he is consulting notes. Only later you learn there are no notes and the speech has taken form while he listened to the speeches which had gone before.

Refreshments are served. There are six types of cakes for the VIPs. For the public, there are 3,000 packed boxes. Each has a drink

a bun, a curry puff and a cake.

Since the speeches took a bit longer than they were supposed to, the PM's rest period is cut short. The next stop is the Kedah Road Development Project. He comes in, with a garland of

jasmine, roses and chrysanthemums. We go through the same routine. The PM gets spirited applause when he says, "The Chief Minister has said it is appropriate that the Kedah Road project be opened by a person from Kedah. Though I am from Kedah, my father is from Penang". And then he goes on to tell the crowd how as a small child he used to come and visit friends of his father in the vicinity of Kedah Road.

It's when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri are about to leave that the scene comes alive. The policeman tells the crowd, "Jalan, jalan, jalan" (Go, go, go), but they surge ahead. All of

them want to touch his hand. There is an old man with a long grey beard. There is a father who beams when his son manages to shake the PM's hand.

"Two over. One more to go," says one of the PM's party. He's referring to one more event at which the Prime Minister has to officiate, the opening of the Prai Barrage in Permatang Pauh, about 10 kilometres from Butterworth.

## Lunching

The lunch is a six-dish affair. Unimpressed, one of the guests present says, "Hope there is desert. And coffee".

"Today is a relaxed day," says an officer with the Prime Minister's office. "You should have been with us when we went to Kedah. We did not eat till 4 pm."

As he gets into the car, a man shouts, 'Salam alaikum'. The PM winds his window down, waves and beams.

Now on to the Chief Minister's house for lunch. Datin Seri is having lunch with the women elsewhere.

After a short rest, we go by chopper to Permatang Pauh. The PM and his party go in one and the reporters follow in another. The chopper we are in seats about 24 on two benches along the side. The roof is lined with a padded quilt-like covering.

There are two rules one must follow in a chopper like this. Don't sit near the open window, for when it lands on a field all the dust flies into your face. And don't wear a saree.

At Permatang Pauh, the crowd is different. It is especially resplendent with 'Bunga Manggar'. The women sit on one side, the men on the other. There is a fair sprinkling of Hajjahs there. The men, a lot of them, have songkoks on. So has the PM.

The speeches begin again. The sun is hot. A girl holding the 'bunga manggar' faints. And still Datin Seri and his wife look fresh.

The PM speaks. His style is more direct here. In between, a man dressed in a scruffy shirt and a sarong keeps clapping. A policeman stands by him, but judges him to be harmless enough.

## Seeing

Refreshments are served for the VIPs and the public under the same shed. The PM and his wife appear to be enjoying this hugely. Datin Seri takes a cake from under the cellophane wrapping on the plate. They exchange pleasantries with some women who look as if they were responsible for the spread.

Then the PM takes a

plate of curry puffs and offers them around. A man in the crowd who seems to know the PM and his wife, maybe from Kedah, says to them, "That's my son."

"Where? Where?" asks Datin Seri across the crowd.

"There, there," he points. They locate him, bring him closer and have a special photograph taken.

As they leave, the people line up wanting to shake their hands. The man with the scruffy shirt, says loudly, "Datuk, Datuk." And someone says, "Let him greet the Datuk." So he comes forward and shakes the PM's hand.

The PM in joking admonishment says, "Didn't I see you at the Butterworth railway station also? There also you did not let me speak."

Then a woman shyly takes the PM's hand, barely touches it and is overcome. An armless man puts forth his stump for the PM. The PM shakes it. And so they move on, surrounding him, wanting to make contact. And here the motorcade moves slowly, the people lining the road. They wave, dressed in their best.

They have seen the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.