

# One-on-one with

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DURING a coffee-break at the South-South Conference in Kuala Lumpur a couple of months ago, Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was chatting amiably with a clutch of senior delegates.

We reporters hovered nearby, clustered around the Prime Minister's Press secretary Jalal Bahaudin, hoping to catch a word or two of what was being said. Nothing was audible.

For most Malaysian journalists, contact with the Prime Minister takes place in either of two situations. One is the walking encounter, when the Press attempts to fire questions at the Prime Minister during public appearances. The other is the formal Press conference,

when the Prime Minister makes his ideas and attitudes known to the media.

In both situations, a gulf exists between us. There is rarely the opportunity to get beneath Dr Mahathir's famous one-liners; to draw him out in expansion of his ideas. There are questions, there are responses. There is little interplay; hardly any dialogue. The Prime Minister dictates, and we of the Press transcribe, perhaps cowed into silence by a sense of our own impotence.

At the recent South-South Conference, the distance between ourselves and our Prime Minister was made all the more acute by the physical proximity afforded by our sharing of a communal coffee-break.

Mostly to myself, I remarked: "What I wouldn't give for a one-on-one with that man." To my astonishment, Jalal latched onto my wishful thinking-aloud and said it sounded like a good idea, would I call him in the morning to discuss it further. I felt as if I'd spent all this time lamenting a closed door without ever bothering to find out that it wasn't locked.

Over our subsequent meetings to lay the groundwork for the interview, it transpired that the Prime Minister and his staff had been wondering how to get just such an interview into the media without it seeming like propaganda; as if the *New Straits Times* had again been roped in to send out the ex-

Interview by  
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pected election-season bromides.

It was decided then that this interview would not follow the usual format, of prepared questions submitted in advance. This was to be more in the nature of a conversation, broad-ranging and free-flowing, one-on-one; as honest and open as it was possible for either of us to be.

The meeting took place last Monday in the Prime Minister's office.

Dr Mahathir, dressed in a brown bush suit, sits behind a large, cluttered desk in a vast, quiet room. A malacca screen separates his workspace from the guest lounge.

## the Premier

Behind him are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, stocked with documents and books including a late edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. To his left is a computer terminal at which he glances from time to time. Beyond that is a sideboard on which perch souvenirs and mementoes, including a scale-model Proton Saga; fronting large picture windows which look out at a clutch of Kuala Lumpur's newest skyscrapers.

The Prime Minister is as attentive and sharp as ever, but he seems a little subdued; a certain weariness suffuses him.

These have been trying times for his administration; it shows in the hard, bitter tightness which underlies his thoughts on those who have accused him of corruption and self-interest.

But his visions and dreams for the future of this nation are still intact — he has not relinquished his faith in their validity and appropriateness. His only concession: that they might not come true as quickly and easily as he'd once hoped.

He gives the impression that politics — the need to win support and fend off the challenges of those who would sit in his place — is an intrusion into smooth governance and development; democracy's necessary evil.

But he seems to bear the burdens of political challenge with the same resolute conviction that has always been characteristic of Mahathir Mohamad — these things are part of the job. They were sent to try him; he will meet the tests with all the confidence, single-mindedness and strength of character that have together brought him to this pass.

After five years as Prime Minister, however, that confidence has become distinctly tempered with rea-

lism. Dr Mahathir has not let go of his vision of what Malaysia could and should be in the future, but the vicissitudes of the past couple of years seem to have given him a new and possibly valuable pragmatism regarding Malaysia as it is now. The dreamer has come down to earth.

The interview lasted 75 minutes and, in somewhat discursive fashion, touched on a wide range of subjects. It will be run in three parts, beginning today and continuing over the weekend.