

Dr Mahathir

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HELICOPTER-hopping with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the interior of Sarawak during the 1982 general election — his first as the Prime Minister — left members of the Press corps exhausted.

The day started just after dawn with a jittery assembly at the Kuching airport. The first business for members of the non-official media was to "sign away" their lives.

It is a standard procedure of the Royal Malaysian Air Force to require non-civil servants travelling on its aircraft to sign a form absolving the RMAF of any responsibility and claims should injury or death occur.

Fortunately, thanks to the expertise of the RMAF personnel, no unwanted incidents occurred except for a minor oil leak suffered by one of the three Nuris used in the travel. The Prime Minister was not on that sturdy bird.

It drove the daylights out of the life of several Pressmen travelling in the aircraft. The Nuri had just left Kuching when traces of black oil were spotted, forcing the pilot to bring it back to base for inspection. It took off again after a brief inspection but trailed the other aircraft by nearly an hour.

The flight over the vast Sarawak tropical rain forests was exhilarating. Gliding barely a few hundred metres above the rich canopy of giant trees, the vastness of the Sarawak jungle was interrupted only by isolated settlements, rock outcrops and meandering rivers.

That was in 1982. Although logging was already at its peak, many parts of Sarawak's virgin forests were still untouched. We can only hope that not much of forest had fallen victim to loggers' chainsaws or the axes of shifting cultivators in the last eight years.

The Prime Minister's first stop was Mukah at the mouth of the river of the same name. The residents of the small town were naturally excited. It was not often that helicopters land in their town to bring the Prime Minister and a host of top-level officials.

Dr Mahathir was the second Prime Minister to visit Mukah. The first was Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1966.

He was immediately whisked away while our aircraft was still in the air. The moment our machine landed, we jumped out, bending our bodies as a natural reaction to the whirling blades above our heads and into the Press cars to chase after the Prime Minister.

When we got to the des-

tinuation, the simple welcoming ceremony that made him a native warrior for the day was over. Only the TV Malaysia crew was there to record the event as they were allowed to travel on the Prime Minister's helicopter.

As if unaffected by the helicopter flight that left a ringing sensation in our ears for hours afterward, he took to the rostrum to speak off-the-cuff to the people for nearly an hour.

Two hours later, he was whisked away in a car to another destination where he spoke to the people and had lunch with them.

We seldom managed to join the Prime Minister at lunches and dinners held in his honour as we had to rush for the telephones, which were not exactly numerous in the interior of Sarawak, to file our reports back to Kuala Lumpur. Radio telephones had not yet been introduced.

The Prime Minister enjoyed eating as much as he enjoyed public speaking. Regardless of what was served, as long as it was *halal*, he would always do justice to the food.

Back in the sixties, in his first parliamentary constituency, Kota Setar Selatan in Kedah, Dr Mahathir and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, created quite an impression with the kampung people for their readiness to sample simple village cooking.

quickens the pace

Food served at village *kenduri kahwin* (wedding feasts) those days was neither classy nor very hygienic. Unless one had a strong stomach, the likelihood of suffering from mild indigestion or purging was on the high side.

After a short rest and performing the *Asar* midday prayers, he took off for Sibu, the main town of Sarawak's Third Division, where he again addressed the people at a secondary school.

It was almost dusk when we assembled at the Sibu airport to join the Prime Minister and his wife on the RMAF Fokker 28 executive jet for a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Alor Star.

But as we waited to board the plane, someone broke the news that the Speaker of the Negri Sembilan State Legislative Assembly, Datuk Mohamad Taha Talib, was found dead in Kampung Seri Asahan, Gemencheh in the district of Tampin. Murder was suspected.

When the Prime Minister arrived, he was instantly surrounded by local and travelling journalists who wanted him to comment on the news. An impromptu Press conference followed.

By the time the luxury jet streaked into the cloudy evening skies, leaving behind the lush green jungle and meandering rivers of Sarawak that had grown

familiar to us in the three days of the tour, it was time for dinner.

I thought it was a bit early for dinner, but the instruction apparently came from the Prime Minister's suite that it be served early. As most of us did not have proper meals since leaving Kuching in the morning, the MAS-supplied dinner tasted exceptionally good.

Soon after we finished dinner, another instruction came from the Prime Minister's suite. It was time for the lights to go off and we were discreetly told to keep our conversation low. The reason — the Prime Minister would like to take a nap.

None of us complained as we were tired too and a snooze after a good dinner could do a world of good. No sooner had the lights gone out, the aircraft flew smack into bad weather.

That gave the faint-hearted among us a good excuse to recite a few *doa* (prayers) and to try to sleep it off. According to aides, the Prime Minister slept throughout the turbulent flight.

He has the ability to shut himself off whenever time and situation permits. All he needs, said his aides, is a few minutes sleep to get rid of tiredness.

For most of us, touching down at Alor Star's Sultan Abdul Halim Airport marked the end of a hectic day. Whatever needed to be

reported after that would be handled by our local counterparts.

But not for the Prime Minister. After a short rest at his private residence in Titi Gajah, a few kilometres from the airport, he was off again, this time to his constituency, Kubang Pasu.

Aides told us the next day that he had toured the Barisan Nasional's operations room and met party workers until the early hours of the morning.

The hard work was well rewarded. His first general election as Prime Minister was a success. The Barisan Nasional won 132 of the 154 parliamentary seats.

The pace quickened during the 1986 general election. The rift in Umno saw the withdrawal of Datuk Musa Hitam and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah from the national scene leaving a void that Dr Mahathir and his new deputy, Encik Abdul Ghafar Baba, had to fill.

Datuk Musa, who earlier in the year resigned from the post of Deputy Prime Minister, confined himself to his home state Johor and Tengku Razaleigh, disappointed that he was not named Datuk Musa's successor, spent most of the campaigning period in Kelantan.

Dr Mahathir fought the 1986 general election almost single-handedly and

put a stop to what was considered the strongest challenge by the opposition parties and their allies.

One hundred and seventy seven seats were at stake in the expanded Parliament. Pas promised an Islamic State and the DAP joined hands with the liberal groups to put an end to the so-called Mahathir's dictatorship.

They failed. Pas conceded four of five parliamentary seats won in 1982 and the DAP won 24 seats. The Islamic State was rejected and the voters were not convinced that Dr Mahathir was a dictator.

The period following the 1986 general election was not an easy one for Dr Mahathir. The resounding victory of the Barisan Nasional and the rapidly recovering economy did not blunt the resolve of Tengku Razaleigh to unseat him as Umno president.

After failing in their challenge in the 1987 Umno election, Tengku Razaleigh's faction took Umno to court and to their dismay, instead of having Dr Mahathir removed, Justice Datuk Harun Hashim, in February 1988, declared Umno unlawful due to the presence of illegal branches.

On Jan 18 last year Dr Mahathir was admitted to the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital and a week later underwent a coronary by-

pass operation, the first on a Prime Minister to be done locally. He was discharged from hospital on Feb 5.

Most people had expected him to slow down. But after a brief rest, he resumed the hectic pace, blazing the political trail to patch up the badly broken Umno.

The pace quickened as he rushed to rebuild the new Umno and reinstate the confidence of the people in the Government and the economy. Simultaneously, the dimension expanded as he started taking greater interest in international affairs, culminating in the hosting of the Commonwealth Summit and the meeting of the Group of 15.

And as all signs point towards an early election, he is spending a lot of time on the road. First he toured the country to meet Umno leaders and supporters, then joined by Barisan Nasional leaders he met BN supporters and the rakyat and now, on the third round, he is meeting associations and special interest groups like padi farmers, fishermen, Felda settlers and the Orang Asli.

Age seems not to have caught up with him. Even young journalists, photographers and cameramen in their twenties and thirties admit that it's hard keeping pace with him. He is 65, and is as fit as a fiddle.