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Mahathir - the ageless ideas man

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AFTER not having a heart-to-heart talk with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for a fairly long time, getting such an opportunity again during his recent working visit to Japan was a refreshing experience.

I am sure Utusan Melayu deputy group editor-in-chief Khalid Mohd and Bernama's executive editor Zainoor Sulaiman shared this feeling.

Without intending to sound boastful but rather to put things in perspective, it has to be stated that Khalid and I had been covering Dr Mahathir since the middle of the 1970s when he was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry.

Those were the days when, as beat reporters, we were unhindered by time and protocol to intercept him for an "ambush" Press conference (to borrow the term used by former Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie to describe impromptu questioning by the Press) or to telephone him at the office and at home for a story.

Those, too, were the times when Dr Mahathir started to make regular visits abroad to promote Malaysian products and attract foreign investment, and to represent the late Tun Hussein Onn, who was then the Prime Minister, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York and other international conferences.

Asked if his feelings and attitude towards the media in general and the journalists whose acquaintance he had made over the decades have changed, the Prime Minister replied:

"I don't think I've changed. You can still call me or interview me. It's people's perception that I've changed."

On whether he is happy with the media and the people running it, especially those he has known for a long time, Dr Mahathir said:

"The question is not so much whether I am happy or not. What really matters is the fact that the media is powerful. I can speak and a few hundred people may hear, but when you report my speech, millions of people will know what I say."

Japanese officials who attended to him during his five-day visit to Okayama Prefecture to the south-west of Tokyo were surprised to see how close Malaysian journalists could get to him and talk freely with him.

They were even more fascinated by the ease with which Dr Mahathir obliged the Malaysian students and trainers who attended one of his functions in the prefectural capital.