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Dr Siti Hasmah - the gentle persuader

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LATE afternoon sunlight streams in through the tall windows of the western annex of Sri Perdana where Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali has settled down for the interview.

The light casts an amber glow over an otherwise aloof room but also makes it a little too warm for comfort despite the air-conditioners humming in the background.

But she sits there, cool as a cucumber, seemingly unaffected by the heat. She is in her trademark baju labuh, of silk batik print in cream and baby-blue, and a lustrous ensemble of pearls on her fingers, neck and ear lobes.

She had earlier walked rather gingerly into the room in sensible-looking black pumps. Apparently, her right knee and elbow are giving her problems - that means no badminton for some time with her "Bakti girls".

Dr Siti Hasmah is head of Bakti, the acronym for the Association of Wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers. It is also sometimes referred to - out of earshot of the Datin Seri, of course - as the "First Wives Club" for Bakti does not count second and subsequent wives in its activities.

Dr Siti Hasmah is clearly devoted to Bakti and its battery of charity-related work.

In fact, several of them - including Datin Faridah Mohamed (Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik's wife) and Datin Faizah Shuiab (Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayob's wife) - are in the next room that afternoon for something less serious: karaoke singing and a cultural dance practice.

Bakti is but one of her activities as the wife of the Prime Minister. She attends numerous functions each week, sometimes accompanying Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, sometimes in her own right.

For instance, a week later, she and Dr Mahathir were in London for the Asia-Europe meeting. From there, she went to Washington to speak on safe motherhood at a World Health Organisation conference.

Dr Siti Hasmah was a public sector medical doctor before she moved on to another "full-time job" as a politician's wife and, it is said, she slipped into the latter role like a natural.

Although essentially an urban Malay, she had little difficulty relating to the Malay grassroots on whom politicians like her husband depend for support.

She has an easy charm that immediately puts even total strangers at ease.

A seasoned journalist remembers his mother telling him how Dr Siti Hasmah, then an ordinary MP's wife, won over the kampung women because "she was not sombong".

They liked the way she laughed so easily and they were amazed that this woman doctor - a pretty rare species then - actually came into their kitchens, asked about their babies and accepted their offer of drinks.

Definitely, she was, and still is, much better at breaking the ice, so to speak, than her husband.

A younger journalist says: "It's not put-on. She really is friendly, even motherly."

Dr Siti Hasmah herself recalls how the wife of a VIP from a Western country, after spending an hour with her, suddenly declared that she felt "so comfortable" in the company of her Malaysian host.

"I almost burst out laughing. I don't know why they are scared ... I

don't look fierce, my husband looks fierce. They think I'm like my husband ... you know, he blasts them!"

She says her medical training - especially the caring aspect - as well as the stint in rural Kedah helped a great deal, even to this day.

"They admire you more if you are humble and act like one of them."

The early days as an medical officer also rekindles amusing memories.

One day, while riding pillion on the tok penghulu's motorcycle to give a health talk in a remote village, the front wheel went into a gaping crack in the earth road. Both she and the penghulu went tumbling into the padi fields.

At a rural home on another occasion, the midwife with her demonstrated how the baby ought to be bathed. After giving a brief talk of sorts, Dr Siti Hasmah, who was neatly groomed as usual, asked whether they had any questions.

A grandmother watching said quite guilelessly: "Sanggul cantik." Apparently, her small audience had been observing more than the childcare demonstration.

Still, she was a little shy and unsure when they returned to Kuala Lumpur in 1974 upon Dr Mahathir's appointment as Education Minister.

"Puan Sri Khatijah (Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie's wife) was the first to approach me. She helped me take my first steps without fumbling."

It took sometime for Dr Siti Hasmah to get used to her husband's climb up the political ladder.

Thus, she would wait quietly with everyone else in the outer office of her Minister husband when she came to pick him up after work. By then, she was working in the Public Health Institute nearby.

Likewise, she waited in the common area when she had to fetch him at the airport, being too shy to use the VIP lounge.

But nothing compared to her consternation when Dr Mahathir was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. The neighbours around their rented house in Petaling Jaya came over with congratulations and the phone rang non-stop.

"He was in Segamat that day and my goodness, when he came home ... all those outriders and the noise! We were so embarrassed.

"Especially in KL, we have so many friends and now they had to move to the side of the road because of us. We would slide down in our seats in embarrassment!

"My husband has this ruling ... they (outriders) are not to simply use the horn or siren. We don't like them using their leg or doing this (her lady-like wave of an arm is only remotely familiar of the way outriders try to sweep us off the road) but sometimes, the new ones, they don't know our idiosyncrasies."

She was more prepared by the time Dr Mahathir was appointed Prime Minister. She very graciously escorted her predecessor, Toh Puan Suhaila Noah, back to the latter's house in the official car and stayed to chat.

That was in 1981. More than 20 years in the political fishbowl seems to have had remarkably few adverse effects on her.

She says she copes with stress by dealing with things she can solve immediately, putting aside the troublesome ones for later.

Her husband, on the other hand, goes horse-riding or into the kitchen where he stirs up something simple like mee goreng for the family.

But, according to her, he used to relax in more "ambitious" ways. When they were still living in Kedah, he made things from wrought iron and even built five fibreglass boats and named them after the children.

Those in a position to make a comparison say Dr Siti Hasmah is still as chirpy, sociable and energetic as ever.

The variety of organisations and causes to which she has lent her support is reflected in the titles bestowed on her - they range from

Mother of Badminton to the Safe Motherhood Award.

Yet, at the same time, she manages to project that demure, three-steps-behind-her-man type of image although there are not a few who believe that her well-bred decorum belies the persuasion she enjoys on her husband.

A framed Lat cartoon, which hangs along a narrow passageway in Sri Perdana, suggests much - it depicts Dr Siti Hasmah holding Dr Mahathir's arm in a backtwist while he announces to an unseen audience: "So remember this, I did not ask men to have four wives ... never ..."

She laughs - though somewhat half-heartedly - at the suggestion that politicians and their wives often seek her out to intercede on their behalf with the Prime Minister.

"My husband has his job ... I do not wish to intervene or to influence him. Once or twice, I tried to but He does not tell me his problems because he says I'm a worrier. I worry more for him than he does himself.

"People assume I know a lot ... `Surely you know', they keep telling me. For example, don't ask me about Cabinet reshuffles. I am the last to know. So many times, I know things from the TV.

"When he comes back, I ask him: `Why didn't you tell me?' He says: `Yes, I didn't tell you. Why should I tell you?' You see, he doesn't want me to interfere or worry.

"But there are certain things which I need to tell him and I do. Sometimes my Bakti members and others, they need advice, to pass on messages and information to my husband. I would do so but I have to make sure it is necessary or relevant.

"Many times, I have been made the postman. Even letters are addressed to me but the message is for my husband."

She even receives anonymous letters, which she dislikes.

Dr Mahathir, it has often been pointed out, keeps a punishing schedule. If that's so, then his wife gives him a run for his money.

She is by his side on most overseas trips and is what the airlines would probably welcome as a dream flyer. Quite often, she boards a plane, downs a cup of Horlicks or Milo and promptly dozes off.

Her only headache when it comes to travelling is in packing a suitable wardrobe that takes into consideration the variety of functions she has to attend. It grows even more complicated when it is a multi-country trip involving different climatic zones.

"That's why I must have my James Galway when packing."

As for her husband's wardrobe, she only sees to stuff like handkerchiefs and underwear.

She has trouble distinguishing between black and blue, so he sorts out his own clothes - suits, shirts, socks and ties - and his ADC packs.

"The last trip, he forgot his cufflinks so now the ADC keeps a pair handy in case he forgets."

Dr Siti Hasmah's strength lies in her devotion to the family. Her voice grows all mellifluous when dwelling on her husband and their children.

Often, her more difficult moments as the Prime Minister's wife arise when she has to juggle official duties with family time. This is especially so during, for instance, Ramadan when the couple are deluged with invitations while in their hearts, it is with family members that they would most wish to break the fast.

Both husband and wife are one of the most high-profile political couples in the country. One is rarely seen without the other.

They are, by most accounts, quite devoted to one another.

Their numerous impulsive moments - captured by the media - suggest as much: for example, him spontaneously tasting the icing from the cake from her finger, she reducing him to guffaws, or him making funny faces at her.

Asked how her parents had taken to the idea of her marrying Dr Mahathir,

she says: "Well, they didn't know I was marrying a Prime Minister! Me, I was just happy to marry a doctor."

As for her husband, she adds rather mischievously: "There were only seven of us (Malay medical students) and I was the only Malay girl. So, he had no choice. But he was very persistent, I guess."

Persistence pays, as they say.

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