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Daim: Charismatic man of few words and swift action

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ON WEDNESDAY (26 May) - after the first course of a typical American business luncheon (health food) - at the Four Seasons hotel in New York, Tun Daim Zainuddin rose to give a five-minute speech to about 70 plus Wall Street investors and accompanying Malaysian officials.

It was the shortest speech I had ever heard by a major politician anywhere. But Daim did say all that needed to be said, namely that, "Malaysia is stable, the economy is recovering, as evidenced by the strong macroeconomic indicators and financial performances ... the prospects are good and your (investors') confidence will not be misplaced," or something to that effect. I took no notes but that was what I recall.

The Second Minister of Finance, Datuk Mustapha Mohamed, elaborated upon what was said and added a couple points which Daim had left unsaid. Questions were then answered effortlessly by Mustapha, ably assisted by Datuk Dr Zeti Aziz, the Deputy Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia. Zeti performed well, reciting what she must have said many times throughout the long road-show.

When they finished, the applause was polite. But in the end, I sensed that the tough New York investors were convinced that there was plenty of good news coming out of Malaysia. The US\$1 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) sovereign bond issue, our first bond issue in nine years and since Malaysia imposed selective capital controls last September, won fans and was oversubscribed - despite difficult market conditions - by 300 per cent though priced at 330 points above comparable US treasuries to give a yield of 8.86 per cent. The 1-year notes were taken up by 135 institutional investors - half from the US, about a quarter from Europe and the balance from Asia. (see CORRECTION above)

The success, I believe, was due to the fact that Daim oozed an aura of authority which inspired the confidence of hard-nosed investors. The lunch was closed to the media, I suppose to enable the two Ministers and their officials to speak freely and objectively and to explain the true state of things. I must say that they managed rather splendidly, given the circumstances.

Barely visible behind the tall lectern, the diminutive and powerful Daim, began by saying that he was not a patient man, he wanted quick results and promised closer relations with all quarters - especially the private sector and he urged them to play a more effective role in speeding up economic recovery. It was at once, both an admission of a flaw and a confirmation of a wish and a high expectation.

Though Daim has none of his predecessor's and successor's (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) charm with spontaneous gestures, studied words, expressions and idioms which seemed right for each different audience, the reserved, bookish and pragmatic treasurer-general of Umno delivered a very convincing message. The investors liked his message: change and recovery will come faster because good policies are in place and he is in charge! Of the eight questions asked, I recall only one and even that, only obliquely which touched on the Anwar situation. The question was about politics and although no name was mentioned, the questioner was clearly referring to Anwar. The rest of the queries were about Malaysia's economic prospects this year, next year and in the new millennium. Mustapha, in flawless, forthright English told the questioner that the Barisan Nasional (BN) would be returned to power. He added that although he was not

anticipating an easy election, the BN would overcome the opposition; the Malaysian voters were and are practical. Anwar was fairly tried and the foreign media were present to report on the long trial. I cannot help noticing that Mustapha speaks better impromptu than when he delivers from a text. He should speak more off the cuff.

The next day, at the Malaysian Permanent Mission to the United Nations, Daim really surprised me: he was frank and very relaxed! He spoke and answered the queries of 20 Malaysian diplomats, bankers and officials based in the Big Apple, for more than two hours.

He was in a rare exuberant element. He surprised and pleased the diplomats and the Malaysian expatriates with his candidness about everything they cared to ask. Mistakes had been made and every care was being taken to avoid a recurrence, he assured his audience.

Daim said he strongly supported the action against Anwar though Anwar was a "close friend", adding that, "Anwar pledges affection and loyalty to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad publicly but undermines him covertly. In private, Anwar and I are close, very close; he visits me all the time but I know that publicly, he demonises me. I advised him to stop his antics but he did not. I asked him to cease engaging in all the proclivities which people have alleged he is inclined towards ... the attacks by his enemies obviously did not deter him."

The taciturn lawyer turned-tycoon-and-powerful politician is a deeply private man who has made and still makes deals: quick, vigorous and brilliant behind the scenes. He is stiff in public but in private, amongst his close friends, he is genial, even talkative and rarely ambiguous; certainly not bored as he always appears to be at public functions.

I believe Daim will continue to play as he always has, (besides Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) a crucial role in Dr Mahathir's Administration. However, right now, his main job I reckon, will be to lower the exaggerated expectations of the opposition parties and their ability to threaten political instability which will and must derail the fast-track economic recovery and even Malaysian democracy.

He has aged faster than me, though I am a year older. He has whiter hair and if he smiles and laughs - I mean publicly - it is such a rarity that it was like a scoop! I am rather amazed with how his resolve and determination just spread onto his face even though he always seems to be staring straight into space, if he is not deep in thought.

The crucial task facing him - I do not envy him - lies in helping to prepare Umno's total readiness, raise its expectations and deny the opposition the sympathy and support of the Malaysian voters. A united and strong Umno - all in readiness - will win as it has always done in every election since before and after independence.

I do not pretend to know a lot about Daim, in spite of a long friendship, but I can claim to be very familiar with the world he has travelled in from the day we first met in Kampong Baru in the early 1960s. Daim has been living, since the early 1980s, in a rarified world where a telephone call from him, his close aides or his secretary is often all that is needed to get the door opened, the wheels oiled and the deal done. In a small way, I also travelled along similar corridors in the 1960s and 1970s and it is with that intimate familiarity of what happens behind closed doors that I can talk with some authority about Daim and the world. Daim still has some unfinished homework left. Now with Anwar no longer around, the Mahathir-Badawi-Daim triumvirate should achieve a greater degree of success: at home and abroad for the benefit of all Malaysians. The man I know is frank and always honest about "something personal". I told him to write about himself before it is too late. One cannot write from the grave. If Daim does as suggested, I know what the result would

be: very much him.