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Dr Mahathir, the people's man

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad flew into Kuching a little after 11pm Tuesday from Sabah. About 1pm the following day, after opening the Senari Terminal, some 30km from Kuching, lunching with Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud and State dignitaries and holding a brief Press conference, he flew out for another function in Johor Baru.

Later, at night, the Barisan Nasional chairman was in Kuala Lumpur for yet another function.

Sarawak was the third leg of his campaign trail. And the journey will not end until the day before polling.

Which means that he has more adrenalin running through him than most of us. You'd think that he would have eased up a little after all these years.

I am resigned to the fact that some people just don't change. They get second wind. And Dr Mahathir is one of them, obviously.

His opponents want him to take a break. Even some journalists would want him to slow down so that they can keep pace.

But they all know Dr Mahathir only too well. He is not letting up.

The good doc has not changed, no sir. Sometimes you forget that he is not the man he was four general elections ago.

I covered my first election in 1982. We were all so much younger then and full of enthusiasm. And it was also Dr Mahathir's first as Prime Minister and BN leader.

Dr Mahathir's running mate was Datuk (now Tan Sri) Musa Hitam and together they toured with their tagline - "Bersih, Cekap, Amanah" (Clean, Efficient, Trustworthy). I loved that and so did the rest of the country. It got such overwhelming response and became a household tune.

"Now, that is the leader I want and I would vote for", someone said to me then. And she did that every election.

I was a rookie then and Kubang Pasu was my assignment. I followed a couple of senior journalists who were kind enough to show me the ropes.

Kedah was another world altogether for me. Never mind if I had just returned from the other side of the globe after finishing my studies.

I had difficulty understanding the local dialect at first but after a few days, it seemed as if I had lived there all my life.

My senior colleagues, all of whom were from Kedah, took me to wherever Dr Mahathir campaigned. They enlightened me on issues that affected the local people. We even went to a kampung where the villagers were mostly of Thai origin and spoke in a strange dialect.

Dr Mahathir sat down with them, listened and endeared himself to them.

Everywhere he went, crowds turned out in big numbers. They all wanted to hear him speak. He did more than that...he talked to the people. In some places, he spoke their language. He was everyone's leader. Everyone wanted to have a claim on him.

Dr Mahathir rode the crest to victory in all the elections: 1986, 1990 and the last one in 1995.

Many people remembered Dr Mahathir as a "very good Deputy Prime Minister" who never attempted to steal the limelight from his number one Tun Hussein Onn.

He filled in Hussein's shoes with ease when the time came.

"He was a good number two. And he was an even better number one," said a journalist.

You get the feeling almost instantaneously that this man was brimming with ideas the minute he assumed the premiership.

"He had big plans for the country. He was going to take the world by storm," a veteran politician said.

For many Malaysians, particularly the younger ones, it was Dr Mahathir who made them proud of their country and of themselves.

If they once needed to explain to people in foreign lands about what and where Malaysia was, they no longer had to as the country had made a name for itself.

When Dr Mahathir said that the BN government was full of ideas to make Malaysia more successful, you'd better believe it because you have seen and still see those ideas translated into reality.

If he tells you that the BN delivers, well he sure isn't lying.

Said an accountant who as a student in a local university was a rabid revolutionary: "Saya anak Malaysia and proud to be one. That man was and is responsible for this sense of pride that I have."

I am reminded of what someone said about Dr Mahathir that you can sure hate the man but only for his guts but you sure admire him and wish you had them (guts).

Malaysia gets better and better after every general election and, if he has his way, we will never turn back.

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