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The young Mahathir

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THE thought that a classmate would one day become the Prime Minister never occurs to a schoolboy. That a star should rise from one's midst is so unreal that the thought is normally dismissed and it fades into the background of humdrum school life. But in the case of (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad) the thought has become a reality. In retrospect, his rise to the highest office in the country comes as no surprise.

In recalling my impressions of Mahathir I do not think that he went out his way to court popularity of teachers or classmates. I think it was in his nature to shun the limelight, as can be judged by the fact that he was never a school prefect; but those who were close to him realised that he was thorough in all that he did.

My impression of him was that he would take on a responsibility that was entrusted to him only if he could do justice to it. To that extent he was realistic.

He was more "literary" than "gamesome". While in the Junior Cambridge in 1941 he was the secretary of King's House; after the war he took on the editorship of the Darulaman and became the chairman of the Literary and Debating Society. If leadership qualities are to be seen these were the two important offices he held which were pointers to the future. I was privileged and happy to serve with him as the sub-editor.

His "leader" of the 1945 issue of the Darulaman was a mature piece on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and was reflective in tone; it was indicative of his ability to come across strongly and clearly.

As chairman of the Literary and Debating Society he organised the debates and talks of the society with efficiency. Although Mahathir was not an outstanding sportsman I noted with pleasure his interest and keenest in games.

Although he did not make the college first team in rugby, soccer, or hockey he was an enthusiastic stalwart in the King's House first teams. He was an ardent supporter of the college rugby team. His interest in the game has never wavered and I believe he took it up seriously when he went on to medical college.

In primary school (at that time part of the college) he was already beginning to make his presence felt. We started together in January 1933 in what was then known as Primary One and then moved up to Primary Two, then Standard One up to Standard Four.

Competition for the first three places in the final examinations was always keen for there were book prizes to be won and received at the Annual Speech Day. Prizes were won by rotation by four or five of us.

Mahathir invariably won a prize. The competition and friendly rivalry solved itself when it was decided to give the best five students in the annual Standard Four examination a "double" promotion, enabling Mahathir, Ooi Eng Ban, Foo Chee Keow, and myself to "jump" to Standard Six (equivalent to the present Form Two). Ahmad Shariff declined the offer.

From then on we were competing with others in the main stream and it took us some time before we could catch up with our own studies to be a threat to the others; and so when the Pacific War broke out we were all set to go into the final year of our school life.

But this was not to be. After sitting for the Junior Cambridge examination we broke up for what was to be the longest holiday any schoolboy would ever have: three years and eight months! And the results

of our examination were not known until, as usual, after the holidays.

And so we dispersed during the war years, each his own way, to fend for himself and to help with the family income, but almost all returned more men than boys. Some were married but all came back, more confident and committed to work for a better world.

We returned matured and hardened by the exposure to living in a world of want and humiliation. Mahathir was no exception. I had the distinct impression, however, that he realised what had to be done in the face of the changing political situation and the fervour for independence. He rightly decided on a career in medicine.

It is the prerogative of the young to laugh at others and at themselves. During our schooldays many were the occasions when this humour was manifest. With Mahathir it oozed rather than spluttered. He was not capable of the boisterous humour of pranksters. His was the dry humour of the intellectual which was sparked off by the comic situation rather than the slapstick.

His jocular rejoinders were half in earnest but were meant to infect a laugh. In the midst of seriousness it was not unusual to see Mahathir juxtapose the ridiculous with telling effect.

Perhaps the greatest impression I have of him is the total lack of airs about him. He treated everyone alike and I think he expected everyone to treat him in the same manner.

- 'Sultan Abdul Hamid College Dalam Kenangan', 1981

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