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Dr Mahathir attends memorial service in honour of Puthucheary

PETALING JAYA, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today walked quietly into the room where a memorial of James Puthucheary was being held, and sat at the back to commemorate the life of the late lawyer, anti-colonial fighter, social and political activist who died on April 3.

Dr Mahathir arrived unexpectedly in the packed hall at about 5.30pm and walked to a seat at the back, while most of the 300-odd crowd had their attention focused on the front of the room where an eulogy to Puthucheary was being delivered.

Dr Ronald McCoy, who chaired the memorial at the Hyatt Regency Saujana Subang, then announced the Prime Minister's presence to loud applause.

Dr Mahathir appeared to be overcome with emotion while giving a very brief speech, after being invited to do so by McCoy.

"I am much better at making political speeches," he said.

"I just came here because I was close to James. (Pauses and composes himself.) Thank you for inviting me to speak."

Earlier, Prof Wang Gangwu, director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, paid tribute to Puthucheary who was his roommate in 1952 at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

Puthucheary, who died at the age of 77, and Wang were both involved in student politics. Puthucheary was arrested several times for opposing British rule.

"James was always more prepared than the rest of us to act for change. He prioritised political action because the times demanded such action. He felt that not to use his talents would be a waste and an irresponsibility."

Wang described those times as "a period of growing up and of transformation" both for himself and for Malaya and Singapore as a multiracial community.

"But his strength was also his weakness. With his passion for reason and intellect, he felt truth would always prevail, that people could always be persuaded of the right things and that people who thought like him would act accordingly.

"He was a trusting, warm human being and dear friend."

Wang said it was Puthucheary to whom he would always turn to for leadership and advice.

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