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Adapting to different situations

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"BEHIND every successful man, there is a wife!" Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali promptly corrected us when asked if she fitted the age-old maxim, "behind every successful man there is a woman".

The Prime Minister's wife said she had taken the liberty of changing the adage, adding that it was only the wife who would be there to comfort the husband when he was down and to share his joys during the good times.

So it has been for Dr Siti Hasmah, who has seen both the sweet and bitter moments of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's political career and struggles.

Dr Mahathir was expelled from Umno and lost in the general election of 1969, but his comeback to active politics culminated in his appointment as Prime Minister on July 16, 1981. All these, says Dr Siti Hasmah, gave her good experience and wisdom.

One frustration, nevertheless, is Dr Mahathir's frequent absence from home.

She gave an example. The Government introduced the first and third Saturdays as "off days" for everybody.

It was given especially for people to be with their families and to enjoy short holidays.

"But, unfortunately, not for us. And I grumble about this. `You give people off on Saturdays to be with their families but you are not with us'."

But Dr Mahathir feels differently.

"Sometimes, he (Dr Mahathir) grumbles that I am doing much more work than he does, and that I have a lot more correspondence than he has," she said in a two-hour interview with the New Sunday Times at Seri Perdana.

The interview was requested much earlier, but Dr Siti Hasmah could only grant it last week due to a busy schedule.

After going through security checks at the main gate, we arrived at the Protocol Block of Seri Perdana at 10.30am, 30 minutes before the scheduled interview.

Thinking we still had time, we were ushered into the guest room.

To our surprise, Dr Siti Hasmah was already in the room waiting for us, dressed in a pink baju kurung. We exchanged greetings as she welcomed us in - with typical Malay courtesy and graciousness.

Throughout the interview, she was frank, leaving nothing off the record. She recalled many experiences and incidents that took place during the 75 years of her life.

She is still busy and has a host of responsibilities, including being the chairman of Bakti (the Association of Ministers' and Deputy Ministers' Wives), patron of the Badminton Association of Malaysia and being involved in a host of non-governmental organisations.

That is one strength she shares with her 76-year-old husband: their hectic schedules would floor a person half their age.

"I'm different from my husband. I don't like air shows and Formula One races. They are noisy," she said.

Dr Siti Hasmah recalled how she witnessed a plane crash during an aerial display when she was serving as a doctor in Alor Star. She has feared them ever since.

Just as she revealed the human side of Dr Mahathir, she also showed a lot of emotion when the subject of people dear to her was brought up,

including those who are no longer as close as before.