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Admiration for our Dr Mahathir

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IT has been on my mind for quite some time to write about our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. I started to admire him back in the 1980s when the Prime Minister standardised the time between Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak. And I admire him to this day.

Since I now live in Langkawi, we get the chance to see him quite often on this island. A few times when I was driving or taking an evening walk with my children, we saw him passing by, driving himself, with Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah by his side.

There were no outriders accompanying them. He looked so at home and relaxed, with the car top wound down. Those who recognised him would wave and he and his wife would in return flash a smile and wave back.

Early last year, I was involved in partly organising an international sports event on this island. On the opening night, we were invited (my husband and I) to attend a dinner.

The Prime Minister was invited to deliver a speech. He did so with his nonchalant way of address that made most of the foreign participants whisper to each other how different he was from what they had heard and read in the media or shown on TV.

I myself couldn't contain my eagerness to meet him eye to eye, and childishly (I am 38, a mother of four, mind you) told my husband "I must get his autograph".

I excused myself from the dinner table, went straight to the guy standing outside the ballroom and I said to him in Malay, "I'd like to see Dr M. Can I do that?"

He must have been very surprised by my request because he looked at me up and down and asked me what it was about. I said cheekily, "I'd like to have an autograph from my Prime Minister."

He then asked me to wait there while he went to see the PM's secretary. After about five minutes he came back looking very serious. I stared at him until he reached where I was standing and said to me, "OK".

I was on cloud nine. After thanking him (he was one of the PM's bodyguards) profusely, I went inside and told my husband that I had succeeded in my mission.

After dinner, we were among the first to come out from the room. My husband had started to inform his new friends (the participants) that I was waiting for the Prime Minister to get his autograph.

After a while a few of the participants came to me and said, "Rose, please be sure to let me also get his autograph from him." I promised they would.

At last I saw the Prime Minister standing up and begin walking towards the door. His political secretary came out and asked me to wait by the door.

When the man himself came out, I stood there like a hopeless little idiot looking at him and handed over my memoir pad for him to sign. He took it from me and smiled and signed. And all I could say was thank you, and nothing else.

I was behaving like a 15-year-old girl. I don't understand it.

In my line of work, I had met famous stars such as Jodie Foster, Jane Seymour, Anthony Hopkins, not to mention our local celebrities. I was never that way with them.

Turning my head I saw many participants surrounding him to also get his

autograph. And I heard him say "I feel like a celebrity tonight". How right he was.

On our way home with one English participant in our car, I remember him saying that the people had high regard for our PM. He was so totally different from what he had heard.

At one time, I remember that a hotel laid out a red carpet to welcome heads of government for a meeting about five years ago. The general manager and all the officials were waiting for these VIPs at the main door. One by one they came through the door except for our PM.

I was sitting in my office when I suddenly saw him strolling through the side entrance with Datuk Leo Moggie, entering the hotel without waiting for anyone to greet him or open the door for him.

This is one of the many reasons why I respect him so much. He is so unlike many of our new and old politicians today. They tend to forget who they are once they are rich and famous.

They were selected by the people and trusted by the Prime Minister when they were given the job. They should treat their job like any of us do, with a sense of responsibility and being trustworthy.

I am sure once they start thinking that the job is their rice-bowl and not some sort of easy way of taking a free holiday abroad, we wouldn't have to worry about the criticism from the people and the opposition parties.

I also admire the Prime Minister's wife. Her smile is genuine. I am sure there are times she feels very tired of going round the country and the world so often.

But everywhere we see her, the smile is always there. Can one imagine having to shake hands with thousands of people during Hari Raya open house?

If I were a Minister's wife, the first condition for my husband would be to count me out. I am not going to shake hands with 2,000 people at one time. I'll die standing up if I have to smile non-stop.

Don't get me wrong. I am a friendly person but to expect me to smile at strangers, now that's a big task. So, a big garland for our beloved "first lady". I am sure the Prime Minister must love her more than anything in this world.

To my simple mind, what the PM is doing now comes from his heart, and he does it because he loves his people. He has indicated he won't be long in his position now. I am sure he'd like to retire and be able to read his favourite books, listen to songs from his favourite singers and start being a grandfather to his grandchildren.

Every Friday, he will be going to the mosque to perform prayers and learn more about Islam. There have been ups and downs in his life. He was never always right. There was a time I had nearly lost faith in him and I didn't care to read or watch TV.

I then thought to myself, if I can feel that way (one who has great respect for him), what about other people? Just because of one or two mistakes that he made during his 21 years as a Prime Minister, it doesn't mean he is not doing his job. He is doing what is best for his people.

He wouldn't be crying in front of millions if he didn't care about his country. Some say it is jatuh standard for a man to cry openly. But he won my heart again when he cried openly. When he cried, he cried for the future of our country and our people, especially the Malays.

I honestly hope that each and everyone of us will give him moral support in his last years in office.

Please don't get me wrong. I am not asking my countrymen to support the PM because I am an Umno member. It's because he is the best at the moment for a dynamic Malaysia.

Much as I admire the PM, I still am not an Umno member. Everyone must be wondering why. It's because I had applied once to become a member. After submitting my form in 1997, I never received any acknowledgement. So I thought to myself, if this is the case, then I wouldn't want to be a part of it.

And I would also like to stress here that I like Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat. I am sure he would have been a great ulama if he didn't mix politics with religion. Can anyone imagine what it would be like if the two of these great men worked together for the benefit of the country?

To the Prime Minister, I hope the next time I see you I will be able to utter something intelligent instead of just a "thank you."