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Dr M describes his successes, failures as the nation's CEO

Passionate about his country and deeply committed to his responsibilities - Ahmad A. Talib and Saiful Azhar Abdullah came to this conclusion, again that is, after an interview with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the occasion of his 20 years in office as Prime Minister. Anuar Hashim was the photographer on this assignment.

THE interview was set on the evening of Wednesday, July 18, two days after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad marked his 20th year in office as the Prime Minister.

Our appointment was at 4.30pm at his office at Putrajaya, but it had to be delayed as several people were still waiting for their turn to meet him.

Forty minutes later, we were ushered to his room. As we opened the door, Dr Mahathir was engrossed at his desk going through a letter but was undistracted by our presence.

Hung on the wall behind him was a carving of the verses from Surah Qursi. On the left side of his desk were two computer monitors - one of which was showing live a Member of Parliament delivering his speech during the Dewan Rakyat proceedings.

Our photographer asked for his permission to take a shot of him at work and, as always, he obliged but replied: "My desk is in a mess".

We were led to an oval desk and as he sat facing us for the interview, Dr Mahathir pointed to the window on his right and said "You can have a view of Kuala Lumpur if it's not hazy."

Wearing a dark suit, he appeared fresh, despite the long hours spent at the Cabinet meeting early in the day.

The intention of the interview was made known to him, it was solely about his long years in office - about trials and tribulations and about his success, failures and frustrations.

It is his 20th year in office as the Prime Minister but many have forgotten that he has been in the Cabinet for 27 years - five years as the Deputy Prime Minister and two years as the Education Minister.

"I feel 27 years is not a long time until I look at my old photographs...I had a lot of hair in the past, but not anymore now," he remarked when reminded of the long years he has been in the Cabinet.

Accompanied by his officers including his Press secretaries, the interview started with a question about his complaint of not having enough time to implement his ideas.

Even his detractors have acknowledged Dr Mahathir's immense contribution to the country's modernisation process but the Prime Minister remarked: "What you are seeing is just on the development of the physical structure".

"But in terms of the development of culture, in terms of the resilience and perseverance of the Malays, I believe I haven't achieved much," he replied softly, with an expression of frustration etched on his face. He paused in between his replies and was overcome by emotion as he spoke of his expectations of his own race - why he wanted them to change and how they had let him down.

Despite all that he had done, he was called names - a dajal and a firaun. "Why am I called a dajal and what have I done that they call me a firaun?", asked Dr Mahathir.

At one juncture, he posed a question whether we knew what it felt to be

colonised?

"I have been through that (pause) terrible, shameful, I could not stand being colonised, that is one thing that I (overcome by emotion)...it is terrible... I can't even describe it."

The interview had to come to an end after 70 minutes because of his other engagement. "I don't know how you're going to write the story," he remarked as he left the oval desk and headed back to his desk to continue with his work.