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Witty and accessible, the newsmen's PM is a hard act to follow

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COVERING a Prime Minister like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad requires much energy and stamina. One cannot do justice to these assignments if one is not adequately fit to handle the job.

It's not just that the distance covered is extensive, it's also the jostling for prime space - fellow journalists are known to get as close to him as possible to fire their questions.

To some of his bodyguards, journalists and cameramen must surely rank as one of their major daily headaches.

The scene where reporters and cameramen crowd around the PM at one speaking-to-reporters routine would often repeat itself elsewhere on the same day.

He may be chairing a meeting in Putrajaya in the morning, and then move on to Kuala Lumpur to open a conference before making an overnight visit to one of the States later in the evening.

Newsmen, therefore, must match him for speed and stamina, which he seems to be blessed with in abundance.

Ask any journalist or photographer tasked with covering the PM for their impressions. Most would say that he is "accessible" and "sporting".

Dr Mahathir seems to love his banter with members of the media following him.

One senior journalist said: "The most interesting are his 'sparring sessions' with foreign journalists. More often than not they will find the tables turned on them with his witty and straight-talking replies." Dr Mahathir is also known to answer all questions posed by the media to him.

"In all my years covering the PM, I have never come across him saying 'no comment' to any query from the reporters," another senior journalist said.

Scenes of Dr Mahathir being "ambushed" or "mobbed" by reporters are a common sight. Sometimes he walks up to the reporters and ask them whether they have anything to ask.

"With his quotes and answers, he's a newsmen's PM," a fellow journalist once said.

Sometimes, the PM would start his unscheduled Press conferences with a question to the waiting reporters. "Ha, apa nak tanya, tanyalah" (ha, what questions have you got, go ahead and ask).

Usually, there would be some hesitation as everyone waits for someone to pose the first question. He would then count "1, 2, 3" and make an attempt to leave the room. Just as he does so, the questions would start pouring.

Press photographers following him say the PM is an obliging person.

"In whatever situation, he will try to accommodate our requests," one of them said.

In jest, another cameraman said: "In this world, everyone including world leaders realise that if they want to look good, they need to obey orders from only two people - the barber and photographer."

The cameraman said Dr Mahathir likes to joke with photographers. He remembered one occasion when the PM was playing host to a visiting President.

Dr Mahathir, who noticed the lenses trained on him, told the President that he was about to perform a magic show.

"He then raised his right hand and at that instant, there was a burst of camera flashes, much to the amusement of everyone present," the

photographer said.

He's known to have scolded journalists too. On one occasion, he told a journalist on the doorsteps of the then Kuala Lumpur Hilton that he (the journalist) could not be a serious one as he was using one of the hotel serviettes as his notebook.

"How could you use a table napkin to write your notes on? I'm sure you're going to misquote me," the PM said.

The journalist has since stopped using a serviette and has been known to have used a file notepad on subsequent assignments.

One editor observed that the PM skips the usual meals when on long overseas flights.

Once he has settled in after the take-off, he would request for his meals to be served first, which is not an unusual service for some major airlines.

After his meal, a hot drink would follow and he would then put on his light shades over his eyes and doze off while the others in the cabin would have their normal meals, watch movies and read.

About an hour before arrival, the PM would wake up, have a light breakfast, take out his files and start working.

By the time the plane lands, he's ready for his assignments - attend briefings where he's known to ask some probing questions, tour factories, attend bilateral meetings, meet his counterpart, make a speech, attend dinner functions and, in between, meet the media. - Ahmad A. Talib

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