

The X-factor in Malay

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The first 10 paragraphs of a Focus article in Sunday Star went missing because of a technical glitch. We repeat the article here for the benefit of our readers.

THIS happened some time in 1997. The venue was Warwick University in Britain, and the event was a meeting between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Malaysian students studying there.

The Malaysian journalist covering the visit had arrived at the campus ahead of the Prime Minister and found a seat among some female students.

Moments later, the Prime Minister entered the hall, wearing a light, pale grey summer suit with white shirt and matching silk tie. He smiled his somewhat bashful smile but broke into a wide grin when those

gathered in the hall rose to their feet in applause.

By then, the young ladies seated around the journalist had become something else.

"They were completely smitten, right from the moment he walked in. I don't think they could even pay attention to what he had to say," the journalist recalled.

The girls were simply distracted by his looks, his attire, the way he smiled and even the way he crooked his head to one side as he took questions.

The incident, the journalist said recently, was a "political education of sorts" for him. Up

till then, he had viewed Dr Mahathir as knowledgeable and dynamic but it had not occurred to him that the Prime Minister, then 72, could have that sort of effect on young women.

It is commonly referred to as charisma, but in political circles, it is also known as the X-factor – a certain quality that sets one politician apart from the rest.

"It's this extra oomph! It's difficult to describe but you just know it when you see it," said Umno Youth politician from Kedah, Guntor Tobeng.

According to Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir, one of Dr Mahathir's seven children, it is almost "like energy" and it radiates from people who have it.

"I felt it right away when I met Nelson Mandela. He had this great warmth and confidence, and the way he spoke and carried himself, without any bitterness at all despite what he'd gone through."

And over the years, Mokhzani has met a number of people with this hard-to-define quality.

But generally, personalities such as these are few and far in-between – personalities who can hold an audience enthralled when they speak and whose presence can send an electrifying effect through the room, as though a spotlight has been switched on.

Those who have it, Umno Youth exco member Datuk Dr Zamry Abdul Kadir noted, seem to move on a different plane from those who do not.

"It can make all the difference in where and how far one goes in politics," he said.

So what exactly is this charisma or X-factor, or as Guntor puts it, that extra oomph?

Appearance, as suggested by the incident in the Warwick

campus, is definitely part of it. It's one of those injustices we have to bear in life, but good-looking people do seem to go through life with less hassle than their less attractive counterparts.

And in politics, good looks are definitely an advantage.

An example is Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, one of Umno's most dashing politicians. His female admirers continue to grow and they seem unbothered by his troubled past.

During a by-election campaign in Kedah, reporters noticed how the former Selangor Menteri Besar sent ripples of excitement through the women wherever he went. They were more interested in him than any of the candidates. Women in the kampung would point him out to each other and crane their necks to get a better glimpse of him.

Even today, some women in Wanita Umno say they do not mind giving him their vote because of his pleasant personality and because he is "*lawasangat*."

It is no different for men. During the contest for the Wanita Umno leadership between Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman several years ago,

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many men in Umno went gaga over the latter's sultry appeal.

Another ingredient to the X-factor recipe, especially in Malay politics, has to be the gift of the gab.

"The oral tradition is still very much alive among the Malays. It's part of their nature to be drawn to people who have a talent for oratory," said Zakhir Mohamed of the International Umno Club Alumni.

Those who speak well find it easy to attract admirers and supporters and also the attention of the leadership.

Former Minister Datuk Anuar Musa was one such politician. His speaking talent was the catalyst to his rapid rise to the top and he made his mark with his fiery speeches during Umno general assemblies. This oratory was talked about by those on the floor and made those onstage sit up.

And during his power-ride in Umno, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was quite unrivalled for his eloquent and flowery oratory, his wit and love for grand words, and innate instinct for whichever audience he was speaking to.

More recently, the Umno grassroots have noticed the rostrum power of two younger Umno politicians - supreme council member Azimi Daim and Putri Umno pro-tem chief Azalina Othman Said.

They rank among the most compelling speakers to have emerged in Umno in recent years. They are able to speak the lingo of the younger set, a cohort that Umno has been trying to court.

said.

There are other miscellaneous elements that add to the X-factor of some personalities

An aide to a Minister said he listened spellbound to a speech by Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie when the latter was still the all-powerful Home Minister.

"I found him fascinating. Looking back, I think it was that sense of confidence and power he had, an air of someone who was in charge, going places," said the aide.

In that sense, position and power also add to the aura and charisma. It fades when one is no longer in the driver's seat.

Some of these charismatic figures are in the opposition parties.

DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang had immense presence.

He was a powerful speaker although some said his aura had much to do with the sense of sacrifice, of martyrdom, that was associated with his political career. He spent decades in the opposition, taking his party through one defeat after another and still, he did not give up.

PAS deputy president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang is another. This fire-and-brimstone orator is surprisingly shy and reticent up close, often the quiet one in a group, with a watchful stillness about him. At the same time, there is no denying that he has an intensity that sends those around him into a buzz.

Once when covering the PAS *muktamar* in Kuala Terengganu, I was making my way into the auditorium along a narrow passageway. Suddenly, there was an urgent whir of

On the PAS side, new face and vice-president Datuk Dr Hassan Ali is seen as a hypnotic speaker who has been known to make his audience cry and laugh at the same time.

A famous family name, it is said, adds to the X-factor.

The most recent example has been Raihan Sulaiman, daughter of the late Umno veteran Sulaiman Palestine, who created such a stir with her intention to contest the top Putri Umno post. In politics, a well-known family name carries a certain magic of its own.

Among many rural folk, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is known as "*cucu Pak 'Shim*," the grandson of his Tok Guru Hashim.

The family name provides immediate name recognition, opens doors shut to others and finds a ready pool of support.

This has been borne out in the careers of politicians like Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, whose fathers were prime ministers.

The journalist who had been in Warwick University recalled how a group of Wanita Umno ladies in their trademark red and white attire had hijacked Najib from him in the middle of an interview.

"These *makcik-makcik* just swarmed all over him, making him pose for photographs with them and they were talking about his *bibir merah* (pink lips). I was transfixed," the journalist

movement behind me and before I could react, a column of men in long robes and turbans were whizzing by, some of them glaring at me for being in the way.

It was only Hadi and his entourage passing by. They were escorting him into the auditorium but, for a moment, it had seemed like there was electricity in the air.

The Chinese appear to lay less emphasis on this X-factor thing in their politics.

"I used to think the Chinese didn't care about politics but, no, they're very aware of what's going on. They also have very different priorities about political leadership. It's important that the leader is knowledgeable, honest, has a sense of self-sacrifice and if there is also some charisma, then good for him," said MCA politician Rita Sim.

Having an extra zing to one's personality cannot be underestimated in the competitive world of politics. But as a number of people have pointed out, it is not the be-all and end-all of a political career.

Charisma can provide politicians a crucial kick-start to their career and an edge over their competitors. But in the long run, the politician must also have the intellect, substance and credibility to go with the looks, charm and family name.

"Dr Mahathir did not last this long based on his looks. Form alone is insufficient. It's the substance that keeps you going in the long term," said Rita.