

Last night, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad talked to CNN International on its regional chat show *Talk Asia*, hosted by Lorraine Hann. During this exclusive interview at his official residence in Putrajaya, the Prime Minister discussed the trials and tribulations of his political career, his retirement, his vision for Malaysia in the 21st Century, plus his family background.

# Dr M: Backstage job not for me

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**H**AHN: Welcome to Talk Asia ... this week, a rare interview with Asia's longest-serving leader in office. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has spent two decades as Prime Minister and in that time, he has become a living symbol of Malay nationalism and the drive to turn a post-colonial backwater into a success story of independence.

He is widely criticised and admired for his authoritarian leadership and his resistance to values many Western nations take for granted. I will share the personal conversation we had in Dr Mahathir's official residence. I think you'll see a very different side to a man who was originally trained as a family physician, but soon became a fixture in Asia's history books.

Before we look at that conversation, I want to take you back a few months, to the day Dr Mahathir resigned at the general assembly of his party, Umno.

It was an extremely emotional moment and took everyone, including his immediate family, by surprise. When I sat down with Dr Mahathir, I asked him if he expected that moment to be so emotional.

Dr M: Well, I thought I could have avoided being emotional, but under the circumstances I suppose I lost control of myself.

*Hahn: Is it out of character for somebody like you?*

Dr M: No, it's not. I have been very emotional before, also at the assembly.

*Hahn: Were you dreading the moment, Prime Minister?*

Dr M: I wasn't. I was looking forward to be able to announce my resignation and to step down immediately.

*Hahn: Was it planned? When you watch what happened live on television, it seemed that everybody was dumbfounded, including your wife.*

Dr M: I didn't tell anybody because several times before I had discussed this possible resignation with some of my colleagues and they all said no, no, no you cannot. So, I thought the only way I can do it is to make a public announcement without telling anyone, not even my wife.

*Hahn: Why did you do it? What was the straw that broke the camel's back and you said OK, that's it?*

Dr M: No straw at all. The camel's back was not broken. What happened was that I had meant to step down in 1998, but because of the crisis and also the problem with my deputy, I had to postpone the resignation that I planned for after the Commonwealth Games. Since then, I have spent time trying to resuscitate the party and I think I've done enough for the party and it is now back on its old footing. So, I thought it was time for me to step down.

*Hahn: Do you think Malaysia can afford losing a gladiator, if I could use that nickname?*

Dr M: Malaysia has got all the things in place to continue growth, the policies are there, the mechanisms are there. So, I think even when I am not around, Malaysia can do with other people who are conversant with the policies.

*Hahn: After you made that shock announcement, how did people close to you react? Was your family taken aback? What was the reaction?*

Dr M: Well, my family accepted it, but the party felt that it was too sudden and they needed more time to adjust and they appealed to me and I had to give in.

*Hahn: Are you absolutely positively going to leave?*

Dr M: Yes, absolutely.

*Hahn: Cut the umbilical cord?*

Dr M: Right.

*Hahn: Not taking on the backstage job as Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has done?*

Dr M: No, not for me.

*Hahn: Why not?*

Dr M: Because I just don't think I should be around interfering with things.

*Hahn: In total 57 years, politics 20 years, slightly over, at the helm of your country. You must miss something about the job.*

Dr M: Well, I miss the job, of course. I think I will stay with the party; I will still work for the party. I want to ensure that the party continues to win. So, I will have more time to go down and meet people.

*Hahn: I mean, it must be difficult to miss the power, miss the control.*

Dr M: No, I miss practising as a doctor but I put up with it because I have other things to do. So, I don't think I will miss things very much.

*Hahn: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will be your successor. Are there any qualities that you two share?*

Dr M: Yes, we believe in the same thing. We believe in the same methods. Of course the styles will be different, but that is all right.

*Hahn: Is that what Malaysia needs, a different style of leader?*

Dr M: Perhaps, I think it will be good for people to have a change.

*Hahn: Don't you think some may miss having a leader such as yourself? One who has put Malaysia effectively on the map?*

Dr M: Some people say they would miss me, but I think people can do without me.

*Hahn: There are two types of legacies, one obviously the physical legacy when you see the Petronas Twin Towers, you see the infrastructure, and then the more intangible sort of cultural legacy. Which is more important to you?*

Dr M: The cultural one is more important. The fact that I was able to maintain the racial harmony between the different peoples in Malaysia, that is more important.

*Hahn: Finding a balance between the races...*

Dr M: The fact that during the econ-

omy turmoil there were no racial clashes, which happens in other countries.

*Hahn: Was that a challenge for you?*

Dr M: Yes, it was. When I was first named Deputy Prime Minister. There was a feeling of shock that I should be chosen because I was labelled as an ultra and very anti-Chinese.

*Hahn: How did you manage to change that perception?*

Dr M: Because that was not true. There is nothing to change, it's just a perception promoted by some people who wanted to get rid of me. Practically, they called me an ultra -- and giving a label to a person is one great way of undermining the person's influence.

*Hahn: That's politics though, isn't it?*

Dr M: It is politics. I accept that.

#### ■ Japanese occupation

Hahn: Much of Dr Mahathir's identity was forged during the period of the Japanese military occupation. I asked him just how much impact that time had on his life.

Dr M: I think it had a great impact. It proved to me that the British were not invincible. They had promised to protect this country for as long as there are the stars, the moon and the sun, but obviously they didn't, so the Japanese did it to them. So, the idea of invincibility vanished. From then on I thought we could do what the Japanese have done, that we are also Asians and we can accomplish and govern ourselves.

*Hahn: Where those tough times in Malaysia?*

Dr M: Yes they were tough times because food was not plentiful and we were very poor. All my brothers lost their jobs. We had to resort to selling bananas on the street side and things like that.

*Hahn: Is it true that you sold banana fritters or pisang goreng?*

Dr M: Yes, I did. I had to earn some money. I can't be always dependant on others. So, I started a small coffee shop and then I went into selling all kinds of things in the local market.

*Hahn: So, there was this entrepre-*

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neurial flare that was coming up early on.

Dr M: Well, I had to learn how to do business and it was good exposure for me.

*Hahn: Did you ever imagine that you would become Prime Minister of Malaysia?*

Dr M: Never, because at that time we didn't even think of being independent. I thought the struggle for independence would take a long time, and it may only be achieved after I am dead and gone.

*Hahn: So, where did this political ambition come from?*

Dr M: Well, immediately after the war, the British came back and they decided to make Malaysia a full colony and not a protected state. That was very much opposed by Malays and I joined, and I was very active among the students, among the young people, getting them to do all kinds of demonstrations, putting up posters and things like that. So, I became involved in politics.

*Hahn: How did you juggle being a physician and at the same time delving into politics?*

Dr M: Not much juggling really. Being a medical practitioner enables me to get in touch with people, under-

# Forged by nationalist spirit

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stand their problems, feel sympathetic towards them and the natural thing is to want to help them and if you become a politician and if you are successful, you can help them even more.

*Hahn: When did you realise you had to give up your practice in order to focus strictly on politics?*

Dr M: I was able to continue with my medical practice while I was Member of Parliament. But when I was appointed Education Minister in 1974, I had to give up my practice because that is the requirement. So, there is no problem there. I gave up medicine because I thought being a minister gives me more opportunities to deal with more people.

*Hahn: Would you consider yourself a typical Malay?*

Dr M: Perhaps not quite typical because I have a tendency to reject any values, even the Malay values, that prevent me from achieving the things I would like to achieve.

*Hahn: Give me an example.*

Dr M: I work harder than most people. I work very hard indeed. See, I work day and night.

*Hahn: Where did that come from?*

Dr M: As a doctor you are out on call most nights, so you don't get continuous sleep and that becomes something that is familiar to you. So, working hard doesn't bother me.

Hahn: If you are not a typical Malay, what are the inherit qualities of a Malay?

Dr M: Well, they are working hard now, but they are not working hard enough. And they like shortcuts and they like to achieve things overnight. And they don't look too far into their future. They live, as they say in Malay, "earning in the morning for the morning, earning in the evening for the evening." That is their saying. And this is not good for them. They have to plan for the future.

Hahn: On a more personal note, I understand that your father was one of the first Malay headmasters at an English language school. Was he tough on you?

Dr M: Yes he was ... we were afraid of him. When he comes home and we hear his coughs as he arrives, we all run to our books to study.

Hahn: So home was almost like school?

Dr M: Almost like school – perhaps more than school.

Hahn: Are there any comparisons that you can draw between, let's say, your father's relationship with you, and your relationship with your country?

Dr M: Yes, I think so. That he's pushing me, I think because he loved me. So the way I push the country is because I love the country.

Hahn: What about your mother? Not too much is written about her. What did she teach you?

Dr M: No, but she has great influence on me too, on the need to be humble; on the need to be friendly with people, to try and accommodate, and things like that. If I get into a quarrel, my mother invariably blames me – never somebody else.

Hahn: So it was like a balance between a very strict father and a very understanding mother.

Dr M: Yes, I was much closer to her.

### ■ Woman behind the man

Hahn: Dr Mahathir had a nickname growing up. Members of his family would call him "Che Det." The title Che is Malay for young people, and Det is an abbreviation of his name.

Later on when Dr Mahathir wrote for student publications he would use the pen name C-H-E Det. I asked Dr Mahathir does anyone else still call him Che Det.

Dr M: Yes, the older members in my family still call me that and in Kedah, when I go home there are friends who call me that.

Hahn: When you have big issues you need to think about, who do you seek advice from?

Dr M: I talk to everybody obliquely, I don't really indicate what I want from them. And in the end I make my own decision.

Hahn: But do you have like an inner circle, it may be family as well, not excluding that somebody that you can really say "I'm really worried about this issue ... what do you think?"

Dr M: No, I don't really open up to people. I think I keep things to myself.

Hahn: Why, is that a question of trust?

Dr M: Well it's not a question of trust, but I think by listening to people, by thinking deeply, I feel I can reach a conclusion. But if I listen to people all the time, some people might have too much influence.

Hahn: So you might get jaded.

Dr M: Yes.

Hahn: Do you have a mentor at any time in your life?

Dr M: I can't remember having one.

Hahn: Let me talk about your wife, how did you two meet?

Dr M: We went to medical college together, same year. She was the only lady Malay medical student, and slowly we got to know each other.

Hahn: So it wasn't love at first sight?

Dr M: Oh no ... I don't think so!

Hahn: When you think about yourself as a young gentleman dating your wife ... or your girlfriend at that time, were you romantic? Did you sweep her off her feet? I mean, what type of a young man were you?

Dr M: No, I think we quarrelled a lot. We get on, but we have differences. We quarrel sometimes, and then we make up.

Hahn: That's a form of communication I'm told.

Dr M: I suppose so.

Hahn: Behind every successful man is a woman, would you agree?

Dr M: Well my wife would say 'behind every successful man is a wife'.

Hahn: Would you agree?

Dr M: I have to.

Hahn: What sort of support has she given you through the years that really meant something to you ... aside from being just your wife?

Dr M: Well, the fact that I can go back to my own house with my wife and my family. That is ample support for me.

Hahn: She raised seven children.

Dr M: I would like to say "we" raised, seven children.

Hahn: What do you think is the secret to your successful marriage?

Dr M: I think tolerance and the fact that we have to live together. I think we have to learn to tolerate each other. And forget and forgive, compromise sometimes like everybody else.

Hahn: We all know you are boss of your country. Are you boss at home?

Dr M: No, no, no. I'm not boss at

home. There're certain things I don't dictate.

Hahn: Like what?

Dr M: Sometimes I'm required to attend certain functions, and I'm told I should attend. I do.

Hahn: What about with your grandchildren?

Dr M: The same I suppose, as all grandparents, I love my grandchildren and they get along with me when I'm around.

Hahn: In terms of the Muslim faith, how do you teach your children to be good Muslims?

Dr M: Very early on, they're taught all the elements of the things they have to do, and also basic understanding of the faith. We get teachers to teach them. We also try by example.

Hahn: You are 76 ... obviously looking at you I would never have guessed that. How do you stay so fit?

Dr M: That is a question many people ask me. I think by moderation, I don't eat too much. I try to get enough sleep in a day, at least six hours if I can. I think having an interesting life is very important, and passion for work.

Hahn: Soon you'll have quite a bit more time on your hands. What are you planning to do?

Dr M: I haven't planned anything yet. I think I will do some writing. I have to record some things, some of my observations.

Hahn: So would that mean an autobiography?

Dr M: It could become an autobiography, but obviously there may be something that I have done that is worthy of recording and maybe others might find them useful.

Hahn: You horse ride. You are an outgoing person. Is that something you are going to do more often? Sailing ... I heard that you've taken up sailing.

Dr M: I hope so. I hope I can ride horses more often. Now I can ride only once a week. I don't go sailing on my own, but I go on cruises in small boats.

Hahn: In Malaysia?

Dr M: In Malaysia, in the Mediterranean sometimes. In the Caribbean when I have the opportunity.

Hahn: So there would be no way that you would return to politics or stay on in your position. You could not see a scenario that could make you stay on as Prime Minister?

Dr M: No. But I will certainly be involved in politics because I am going to go around and explain the whole idea of Malaysia and its politics and why it should be a democracy, and how you should go about developing the country.

Hahn: And I'm sure a lot of people will listen. That concludes this special edition of *Talk Asia* with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.