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21 years, 21 voices

Ridzal A. Latiff; Syed Feisal Barakbah; Hardev Kaur; Shareem Amry; HIS eyes can freeze you, his tongue can cut you to the quick. The wrong side of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is - as many have found out - colder than the Antarctica. But, as many more will attest, there is another man underneath all the scrutiny and analytical level-headedness. Twenty-one years ago today, he assumed the office of Prime Minister. While he has made sweeping changes, Dr Mahathir has also sneaked into our lives in the most surprising, everyday ways. This is a man whose eyes crinkle up warmly when he smiles, who likes books and fast cars, and whose heartstrings are tugged irresistibly by children. We feature the voices of 21 people, all of whom speak of a man who is more than just the Prime Minister.

\* Arshad Md Yusof, 76, known affectionately as Pak Chat, has been Dr Mahathir's neighbour in Titi Gajah since 1968:

"Dr Mahathir loves broiled meat dipped in air asam (tamarind juice with pounded chillies), which is one of my wife's specialities. He never missed an invitation to our house for lunch or dinner if we said daging cecah air asam was on the menu.

"He doesn't seem like he's aged much. He was always smiling, yet firm at the same time, like he is now.

"He was really into carpentry. His most notable effort was the boat he built with Tan Sri Zahir, the current Dewan Rakyat speaker. Dr Mahathir was Education Minister at the time. It seemed like an impossible task but he always said, 'Boleh'."

\* One of Pak Chat's daughters, Wan Zainab Arshad, used to study in Dr Mahathir's house:

"We used to play with Dr Mahathir's children Mirzan, Mokhzani, Mukhriz and Marina. We would cross the road to the padi fields on the other side to catch fish or to fly kites.

"Knowing that our own house was a little crowded and noisy, Dr Mahathir often invited us to study together with his children in their study room."

\* Zainol Abidin Mohamed, 65, is Pak Chak's son-in-law and a retired education officer. He first met Dr Mahathir at the Institut Perguruan Darul Aman in Bandar Darul Aman:

"We were at a meeting, with Dr Mahathir acting as the chairman. Prof Awang Had Salleh (now Tan Sri) was also there.

"Dr Mahathir told the panel members that he had a simple announcement to make: a university was to be built in Kedah, and he told us not to make things difficult. 'That's how Universiti Utara Malaysia was born, and Awang Had Salleh was made its first Vice-Chancellor.'"

\* Ahmad Ridzuan, 33, is the Coffee Club Express manager at Kinokuniya KLCC:

"The first time I saw him here was on May 1 last year, Labour Day. I was in the kitchen preparing something and one of the security guards called me: 'Eh, Ridzuan ... Ridzuan! Do you have any tables?'

"'Yes,' I said. 'You can have any table you want.'"

"'But this one is very special,' he said. Then I looked out - oh my God! - it was the Prime Minister; he came with his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah. He was sharing the table with a customer - it was really packed that day. I told him I could clear a table for him, but he said no, he just wanted to share.

"There were two bodyguards. Actually, he said there were more, but we

couldn't see them. So many foreigners and children came to ask for signatures. I can't imagine this guy lah, he's so easy to approach. He just smiled and signed all the books and took photos.

"I asked him `Datuk Seri, what do you want to drink?' He asked the person beside him what he was drinking, and the guy said it was ice capuccino.

"`OK,' he said. `I'll have ice capuccino... Siti, what do you want to drink?' She had ice capuccino too. "I offered him my quiche on the house. He said it was very nice."

\* Datin Faridah Abdul Talib, 51, is a former member of the staff at Maha Clinic:

"Many patients said they felt better immediately after being treated by Dr Mahathir. His comforting manner soothed the patients, some of whom would visit the clinic merely to talk to him about other problems.

"He would go down to the river behind the clinic to attend to those who travelled by boat and were too sick to move. We travelled by boat to see those who were too ill to travel themselves and he never charged them extra ... most of the time he hardly charged them anything."

\* Dr Alijah Gordon, 73, is chairperson of the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute

"I first met Dr Mahathir through his wife in 1957. She and I were sitting in her living room in Alor Star one day when he walked in - quietly, unassumingly, almost sheepishly.

"A decade or so later, Dr Mahathir was persona non grata, a political leper. The Special Branch was lurking around his house - he was under observation. I continued to keep in touch with him, though, and he asked why I hadn't deserted him, as many had.

"The night Umno showed him all was forgiven, I waited for him in the lobby of the Majestic. He arrived in a sweater and slippers ... no one else would've been so low key!

"He once said that the greatest contribution of Western civilisation was the en suite bathroom ... and he was dead serious! Perhaps he still feels the same."

\* Datuk Lew Sip Hon, 77, was Dr Mahathir's deputy in the Trade and Industry Ministry in 1978:

"I like working with him because he is very decisive.

"He is easily approachable and at the Ministry he gave me a free hand. All he wanted to know was that the end results were beneficial to the country. When he wanted to implement the national car project, for example, he was tired of hearing foreign car manufacturers telling him that the project was not economically viable if production was less than half a million units a year.

"He told me to implement the plan, and said, `I leave it to you how you want to do it. I want the national car project to be in operation. I have decided that we will go ahead with the project'."

\* Former Malaysian Examination Syndicate secretary-general Datuk Syed Abu Bakar Barakbah first met Dr Mahathir during a medical checkup at the Alor Star General Hospital in 1955:

"He asked for the purpose of the examination, and when I told him I was entering Universiti Malaya, he smiled and wished me good luck. I met him again over the years when he was Education Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

"When I was the Perak education director in 1975, teachers from the rural areas grouped together and pestered the department to transfer them to urban areas.

"I arranged a meeting with the teachers concerned in Grik, and Dr Mahathir, who was then the Education Minister, expressed his wish to

attend the talk.

"He simply related the hardship faced by teachers in Sabah and Sarawak who had to cross rivers and streams, who climbed mountains and crossed swaying rope bridges, and who trekked through jungles to reach their schools.

"Dr Mahathir said that being dedicated and knowing that they were needed there, the teachers never complained. The harassment for transfers stopped after that meeting."

\* Sukhidir Kemat, an executive butler at Putra World Trade Centre, has served the Prime Minister on numerous occasions:

"The PM isn't a fussy eater. His favourites include tauhu sumbat, grilled meat, gado gado and papadam, all of which we try to include whenever possible in the menu. He is always the perfect gentleman; no matter how angry he is during a meeting, he never brings the dispute to the dining table.

"He also has a great sense of humour: once he summoned me to his suite, which was freezing cold, and asked me, 'Do you store frozen meat in here?'

"Another time his fingers got trapped in a chair. I assured him that I would get the chair changed, but because of a busy schedule, I forgot. The next time he saw it he said to me, 'Nanti I saman you, baru tahu!' (I'll fine you!)

"He is also a warm person who interacts with the rakyat and who doesn't like being treated like a VVIP. He always insists that his chair - either for meetings or for lunches - be like everybody else's.

\* Datuk Kamaruddin Abdul Ghani, the world's top endurance rider and executive director of Bukit Kiara Resort:

"I first saw him in 1974 at Subang airport when he was Education Minister. He was sending off, or meeting, one of his sons who studied abroad - and he was completely alone. No bodyguards. No hangers-on. He didn't disappear into the VIP room, and he didn't demand to be treated differently.

"Years later, I accompanied him to Mauritius and he decided on a morning ride on the beach. As our party cantered the length of the shore, his horse decided that the comfort of its own stall at the stables was preferable to the enforced exercise, and bolted for home! Dr Mahathir was thrown, and lay winded on the sand.

"The officials with us were ashen. But Dr Mahathir got to his feet. He dusted himself off - and insisted that the ride continue.

"He remounted the same horse and continued for over an hour. And, not content with that display of grit, he carried on with the day's programmes, which ended way after midnight."

\* Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam, 54, Cuepacs president and National Union of the Teaching Profession secretary-general, has known Dr Mahathir for 30 years.

"I remember meeting him at the Station Hotel in Ipoh in 1974, when he was inaugurating the first NUTP delegates conference. He had longer hair then. Dr Mahathir had just been appointed Education Minister, but he was so charismatic and so sharp - he obviously knew what he was talking about and everyone was impressed. We knew then that he had a vision, and that he would go very far.

"The Prime Minister is a very fair man, but he will melt when he sees the plight of the worker, and of the poor. When we went to his office to negotiate a bonus for civil servants years ago while the country faced an economic crisis, I told him that despite the crisis, he said he had expected a long argument from us. Instead, with our appeal, he told us the Government would give out a RM400 bonus to civil servants. And because he was so close to the workers' hearts, they decided to give back RM10 of

that money to the Government."

\* Zainon Zain, 75, has worked at Maha Clinic since 1959:

"Dr Mahathir's caring attitude extended to asking some of the patients whether they could pay for their treatment. We had to look carefully for what he would jot down on the treatment sheets of some patients. The codes he used were PAA (Pay Any Amount) and NC (No Charge).

"Dr Mahathir always insisted that the more serious patients be attended to first, especially children who were crying. Sometimes he would first attend to those who came from afar by bus or train, especially those from Alor Belat, Tokai, Ko'bah or Jenun.

"He wanted them treated by 11am so they could catch the 1pm train back home. It was as if he had memorised the train schedules in and out of town!

"A fine example of his 'boleh' spirit was the time he was making a boat. One of his Chinese friends said it would cost RM30,000 to buy one, and RM60,000 to build one. And he said, 'Well, at least I get to learn how to build a boat.'"

\* Dr Yacob Dawood, 62, who now runs Maha Clinic, describes Dr Mahathir as a workaholic:

"I remember in 1972 he would travel every Thursday night after work to attend meetings or do party or political work in Kuala Lumpur. Back then travelling from Alor Star to Kuala Lumpur was no easy task, but he would make the journey every weekend.

"He never says he doesn't have time for anything. At the clinic, even if he was already in his car, he would re-open if he saw a patient approaching. His patients loved him - he listened and was dedicated to them, like he is now, just on a bigger scale.

"His 'Look East' policy was apparent even in '60s. I remember when all of us doctors back then only used continental cars like Alfa, Peugeot, Renault and Volvo. But he had three Japanese cars, two Toyotas and a Mazda."

\* Royal Professor Ungku A. Aziz, 80, was the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya for 20 years, starting in 1968:

"In all my dealings with him, I've found him to be a very effective, rational and precise person. When you put a problem to him, he is able to say right away, 'yes' or 'no'.

"I remember when I was VC, I was having a fight with all the other VCs. Mahathir was the Minister of Education then, so he called us in and asked each of us to give him our statements.

After we were done he said straightaway, 'We will follow Ungku Aziz's way.' Then, as now, people weren't going to argue with him.

"Other Ministers in the same position would have waffled and asked you to come and see them about it later. But he has always been able to make up his mind quickly.

"The decision he made that day was very important because it affected the lives of hundreds of people. And it turned out to be the right decision."

\* Sharifah Asma Syed Ahmad, the principal of Sekolah Menengah Tun Sharifah Rodziah, still laughs at the memory of her first encounter with Dr Mahathir:

"A friend and I went to see Dr Mahathir for a medical check-up after we were accepted to enter university.

"While we were in the examination room with him, a smiling middle-aged Chinese woman entered the room. While chatting excitedly, she handed over a basket containing black and white chickens. It was her present to him for having successfully treated her ailment."

\* Shaawal Agos has been Dr Mahathir's driver for 21 years:

"Dr Mahathir never demands that I get or do something for him. He always asks, 'Boleh tolong?' (Can you help?) He is a very kind, gentle, humble and considerate boss. He does not take me for granted, even though I am his driver.

"He does not discriminate and does not expect any favours or special privileges. Once, when Dr Mahathir was driving, he stopped at the toll-booth and the attendant, who recognised the Prime Minister, refused to accept payment. But Dr Mahathir insisted that he pay the toll as he was using the highway. He said that he should be charged for driving on it just like everyone else.

"Dr Mahathir loves cars and prefers to drive himself when he does not have official functions, or on weekends and holidays. When he is at the wheel he likes to test the car's capabilities.

"Once he was flagged down on the highway. Without hesitation, he stopped and wound down the windscreen. The traffic police officer, recognising the driver, immediately stood at attention - he did not expect to see the Prime Minister driving."

\* Tan Sri Musa Hitam, 68, is a former Deputy Prime Minister:

"A couple of years after our split, when my daughter was about to get married, I went to see him. I wanted to invite him to the wedding. But I really didn't know if he would come.

"I pre-empted the invitation by saying 'I don't know if you want to come, since we've been quarrelling.'

"He seemed upset. He looked at me and said: 'That's politics. This is friendship.'

"It really struck me. It's something I've never forgotten."

\* Tan Sri Dr Murad Mohamad Noor, former Education Ministry director-general, first worked with Dr Mahathir when he was Education Minister:

"Dr Mahathir is very quick to understand things - there's no need to give him lengthy briefings. And he is very decisive. He never postpones issues, however complicated. He deals with them straight away. That's how many major issues have been solved, and projects and programmes have been introduced with far-reaching effects ... effects which we see till today.

"The most striking thing about him is that his ideas are very simple. That is his greatest gift. And he is yet to be proven wrong in any of his ideas!

"For example, many years ago, he wanted Malaysia to produce its own cars but everyone was sceptical. He called some of us for a meeting, and after three hours, convinced us all! And he hasn't been proven wrong there either. He has the amazing ability to see two steps ahead of all of us.

\* Three siblings - Endan Abdul Hamid, 76, Mansor Abdul Hamid, 70, and Nasriah Abdul Hamid, 69, - practically grew up together with Dr Mahathir:

"I was already a teacher when Dr Mahathir was studying medicine," said Endan. "Whenever I visited Kilang Ais, he teased me about how boring it was to be a teacher.

"Once, while he was eating laksa I had made, he almost swallowed a fish bone. He pretended to be angry and said, 'What is this, Endan? What type of laksa is this? Do you want to kill me?'

Mansor said his reading hobby has always been influenced by his old friend. "I was still in secondary school and stayed in his house as my parents were in Kulim. When he came back during his semester holidays while studying medicine in Singapore, he always brought back lots of books.

"Each book looked like it was hundreds of pages long - some of them were his medical books, which he studied even during the holidays. He told me to cultivate the reading habit, because it led the way to knowledge," Mansor said.

Nasriah, also a teacher, said Dr Mahathir always insisted that she speak English with him so she could learn the language.

"My only regret is that I didn't follow his advice, and ended up unable to speak even a smattering of English. Now it's a global language," she said.

"We have to be very careful when speaking to him, because he insists that we speak English, and when we do he bashes us again for speaking broken English.

"Then he says the things we talk about are full of nonsense, yet he himself can be full of nonsense sometimes," Nasriah laughed.

\* Shuhaimi Baba, film director:

"I remember talking to him about the e-Village.

"At that time, his faith in the elite of the `e-Villagers' was unshakeable.

"We disagreed on some points and I tried to even out the unrealistic picture that was given to him.

"He didn't like the picture I gave, but I could also see that he was listening.

"He once said that he was fed up with all the exaggerated accolades given to him.

"He has made his feelings clear but the accolades continue.

"He wants to be addressed as simply as possible, without all the heavy puji-pujian before his name.

"My friend told me Dr Mahatheer (as Americans would pronounce it) is the best branding for Malaysia - he sells Malaysia like no advertising can."

\* Zainab Saad, 54, worked at Dr Mahathir's Maha Clinic from 1969 to 1981:

"Doc always said, that to learn English, we had to think in English. He always had four newspapers on his desk: The Straits Times, Straits Echo, The Star and Utusan. He would even read when he was eating, especially during breakfast.

"He also loved to write. Then he would ask one of us to type. Typing his drafts improved our command of English and increased our knowledge, especially when we had the honour of typing out The Malay Dilemma.

"It also made us more aware of not making mistakes, because he tends to harp on your mistakes, just so you don't make one again. Especially a silly one.

"He also has a passion for carpentry and DIY home improvements. The doors and windows at his house were made by him. He even made a bed for the clinic, which I think is still there.

"He didn't order us around; he preferred us to initiate things and to put our ideas to him. He always encouraged us to challenge ourselves. He kept saying to me, `Why be a clinic nurse when you can be a professional one?'

"Doc definitely was and still is a man with a vision. One day after I had just started working with him in `69, we were on the way home in his car when he said it would be so much better if roads had two lanes.

"He said that with two lanes, cars could avoid accidents when overtaking. He was talking about a highway, but he was talking about it to an orang kampung like me.

"Many of us just couldn't imagine what he was talking about. And now we can."