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Mahathir-Birthday
DR MAHATHIR TURNS 77 TOMORROW

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 19 (Bernama) -- At an age when most Malaysians would be content with living a sedate lifestyle, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who celebrates his 77th birthday tomorrow, continues to astound people with his seemingly boundless energy in fulfilling his duty to the nation.

Typical of his hectic daily schedule, and on the eve of his birthday, Dr Mahathir is in Kuching to open the triennial delegates conference of the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) before going to Bintulu to open its spanking new RM385 million airport.

Although the event is not officially celebrated, the prime minister may have a quiet birthday with his family and perhaps partake in "surprise" cake-cutting ceremonies at some of the functions he attends in the next few days.

And, given Dr Mahathir's announcement that he will step down as prime minister in October next year, this will likely be his last birthday while in office.

Malaysia's fourth head of government was born on Dec 20, 1925 at Kampung Seberang Perak in Alor Star to Mohamad Iskandar and Wan Tempawan Wan Hanafi. He is the youngest of nine siblings.

A perusal of one of his biographies would enlighten readers on how Dr Mahathir initially aspired to follow a career in law but ended up pursuing medicine at the University of Malaya in Singapore, obtaining his MBBS in 1953.

He went on to marry Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali on Aug 5, 1956, and are blessed with five children. The couple later adopted two other children.

He was known to be a very resourceful, tenacious and hardworking person when he was young -- traits that would prove invaluable later on in a leader who would steer the country out of some serious crises.

The future prime minister was also known to be an extremely compassionate human being with tales of how he would provide free treatment for poor patients at his MAHA Clinic in Alor Star abound.

Dr Mahathir became Malaysia's prime minister on July 16, 1981 and has since been the prime mover behind the country's march towards development and various achievements locally and internationally.

It is Dr Mahathir who has instilled in Malaysians the spirit that they can achieve anything they want provided they are prepared to work hard for it, as embodied by the "Malaysia Boleh" slogan.

Dr Mahathir is not one to suppress his thoughts about the Malay race, time and again reminding them on the need to be less-reliant on government help in order to compete successfully with the other races.

Visitors to this country often express wonder to see how the various races living harmoniously together, a point that Dr Mahathir has always stressed as a prerequisite for a prosperous and successful Malaysia.

And in him, Malaysians have found a leader who is willing to stick out his neck for what he believes to be for the good of the country, as amply shown by his espousal of unorthodox ways to bring the nation out of the crippling 1997 financial crisis.

People have also called Dr Mahathir a "champion" of the developing nations, not least for his fearless criticism of Western dominance in world affairs, for example, the current North-dominated globalisation process.

Despite being the favourite punching bag of the foreign media, the world seems to be "rediscovering" the prime minister, especially in the wake of the momentous Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

With the negative perception of Islam and Muslims rampant nowadays, many are calling for moderate Muslims to stand up and show that the actions of the terrorists are not what Islam is all about.

In an article which appeared in the Dec 6 edition of the International Herald Tribune, author Michael Backman said that one such figure would be Dr Mahathir, the Malaysian leader who has shown that a country can be both Muslim and modern as well as pro-development and outward-looking.

The majority of Malaysians have known for a long time that their prime minister is a cut above the rest.

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