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Premier in power

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is arguably the most analysed Prime Minister ever, the most relentlessly examined, the most controversial. He entered Parliament in 1964 as a backbencher, lost his seat in 1969, and shortly after that, got expelled from UMNO. During Tun Razak's time, Mahathir was made chairman of Fima, and then a senator. After that, Mahathir's rise was meteoric - education minister, deputy prime minister and minister of trade and industry, and, in 1981, when Tun Hussein Onn stepped down citing ill health, Mahathir assumed the highest office in the land. Twenty-one years on, Mahathir announced his retirement. As the nation ponders life without Mahathir, Malaysian Business looks back on the past seven interviews with the man, both before and during his premiership.

1974: As chairman of Food Industries of Malaysia Sdn Bhd (FIMA)

You have been chairman of FIMA for almost two years. When you took over, the pineapple canneries in Johor faced serious marketing problems. What is the position now?

The situation has improved tremendously. This year, we are selling much more canned pineapple than we have ever sold before. In July this year, we sold RM3.3 million worth, the single biggest sale ever recorded per month by the two canneries. We have improved efficiency and the running of the factory, which was not properly done before. No one really attended to it, no one actually got on to the factory floor.

When I moved into FIMA, my first job was finding out what was wrong. I went to the Kilang Nanas Tanah Melayu Sdn Bhd (Pineapple Cannery of Malaysia) factory in Johor to look at the actual flow and process. So many things were wasted, such as sugar, which was falling onto the floor. It was a process of getting evidence and finding where the mistakes were, and solving them. There was a lot of resistance at first.

When you became chairman of FIMA, some unkind people said that this appointment was merely a device to bring an abrasive but theoretical critic to heel. You would learn that getting results is not so easy. In fact, you had not been an administrator before. What did you feel about the appointment?

What is not generally known is that I asked for a job that would give me a chance to show what I can do. Business is not new to me. I have been involved in the smallest and biggest types of business, such as mining. I have made and lost. During the Japanese Occupation I sold pisang goreng. I have always been doing some business or other. I was in housing, too. I went into mining with some other Bumiputeras, but I lost money on that investment. I know the good and bad points, and I felt that this experience would stand me in good stead when I went into organising things.

In the 1960s, you were cast as an 'ultra', a militant, but now you are part of the establishment, as it were. Have you changed, or has the establishment?

I never considered myself an ultra but as an outspoken person. What I dislike about labels is that anything you say is cast as characteristic. I may say the most reasonable thing, but it is said to be ultra. The moment I am labelled as ultra, I am out. All my analyses are based on valid reasons, not only here but in other countries. When I went to Ghana, I saw people building 20-storey buildings. Yet, people here say that Malays

cannot build such high buildings because they live in one-storey houses. The Ghanaians have a similar tradition. If people in Ghana can do it, why can't the Malays? I think it is nonsense. If I am an ultra, I wouldn't be here today. There are some who are extreme without arguing their case with valid reasons. But the number of ultras is decreasing.

1976: As Deputy Prime Minister

Perhaps it is over frank Dr, but what do you say to those who fear you and think of you as an extremist Malay politician?

Well, in the first place, you have to decide what is an extremist Malay politician. I don't consider myself an extremist Malay politician; I would consider myself a very frank politician who likes to speak up whenever there is something that has to be said.

If speaking the truth makes one an extremist, I would consider myself a Malay extremist. But if I am expected to deal with facts and the truth, I don't see how else I can get about doing things without resorting to statistics and other figures.

And the other things I did made others accuse me of being an extremist - when I pointed out things that were not right in society and that had to be corrected. Was I an extremist when I pointed out that unless certain things were corrected, it could lead to racial tension and it could lead to riots? In fact, I spoke about this to the Selangor Association of Graduates three months before the riots of May 1969, pointing out the exasperation among the Malays that could lead to racial clashes. Of course, nobody took much heed of what I said, because people were living in a dream world at that time.

Do you think this frankness was among the factors that made Datuk Hussein choose you as deputy prime minister?

Well, frankly, I don't know why Datuk Hussein chose me, I mean specially why. I have as far as possible tried to deal squarely with the problems faced by the Ministry of Education, sticking to the correct procedures irrespective of adverse criticism from people. I feel that if you are to do a good job, you must be willing to be unpopular - provided that you do the right thing. Perhaps that is appreciated, perhaps that is not; I would not be able to say. Whether it influenced Datuk Hussein's thinking in making his choice on the deputy prime ministership, I would not be able to say. But I would certainly imagine that if this country is going to prosper, to be stable, there is a need to ... to be willing to face problems and to accept facts as they are, to devise methods of overcoming them in as cool and efficient a manner as possible.

Do you think the non-Malays have anything to fear for their future?

I don't think there is anything for them to fear. The people who fear are the people who want to make everything for themselves. For the average non-Malays, there is nothing to fear. They have more opportunities in this country than anywhere else. You must remember, not so long ago, two Chinese students who were in Australia tried to work as cooks, but they were not allowed to. But if those same people come back here, they can work and become millionaires, not only cooks. If they want to become millionaires in this country, they can if they work hard enough, and a lot of them have become millionaires.

1979: As Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade & Industry

As minister of trade and industry, you must be able to speed up decisions, clear bottlenecks and generally get things moving faster?

My job is generally to stimulate trade and industry in this country, to see that everybody gets fair share - that's my main job. Other than that, I'm also involved in the supportive services, relevant to trade and industry.

So I make use of my position as deputy prime minister to cut across

other ministries to get the sort of things to ensure the success of trade and industry. Let's say port and airport facilities: (these are) not under me, but because port and airports have relevance to business and industry in the country, I have to co-ordinate these and other facilities that are related to industry. For example, container handling or cargo handling, the development of airports generally, even telecoms - whether we are getting the telex facilities or not. All these are related to trade and industry. They have to be developed in order that trade and industry may also develop. Also, the building of roads, communication. The central tollway we are going into is part of the trade and industry development.

1980: As Deputy Prime Minister

Dr Mahathir is a forthright man, which does not endear him to everybody. Either as a Government back-bencher from the time he first entered Parliament in 1964 or as deputy prime minister today, he speaks his mind.

Power and responsibility have acted as a constraint on most politicians, made them more circumspect - but not Dr Mahathir. He says what he thinks is right. These are quotes from an interview with the deputy prime minister:

`There is a defect in being nice because one is very likely to be taken for granted. And as far as I'm concerned, I'm not going to be nice.'

`I believe I have moderate views - (I'm) not ultra, extremist ... (these are) just labels politicians like to give their rivals in order to colour everything they say.

`If you examine all that I have said, I will admit to forthrightness and frankness, but I will not admit to being extreme.

`All I was asking for was fair treatment for the Malays, for the national interest ... I was asking for the have-nots (to be given a chance). In those days, the number of Bumiputera students in the universities was minute, there was hardly any in business. (The Bumiputeras) must participate, thought not by ousting everybody or taking over the whole show - just as I don't believe the others should take over in whatever field.'

`We live in a difficult world. Nobody owes us a living. Anything that is unfair, the Government can eliminate, but the Government cannot be expected to be unfair the other way. It is up to the Bumiputeras really now.'

`The NEP does not promise to make millionaires of every Bumiputeras. It only promises to upgrade the standards of all Bumiputeras. Some of them will, of course, be upgraded more; others will be upgraded less.'

Malaysians, Dr Mahathir continues, do not know foreign markets. But goods from everywhere are being sold in large quantities all over the world. `There is no reason why we cannot move in. We must find out about the market and move.'

1982: As Prime Minister and minister of home affairs

You have spoken about the need for Malaysian businessmen to be more adventurous. You, in fact, have been on record as saying they are reluctant to venture into anything unless protected. Would you elaborate? What are your expectations?

This is my impression, the impression I have always had. Whenever a Malaysian businessman wants to do anything, the first thing he asks himself is: will the Government protect me? And if there is no provision for his protection he will demand that there should be some protection otherwise he will not venture. This comes from thinking rather small and from limited perspectives. It makes it difficult for them to ever go out of the country where they cannot demand that other governments protect them and, therefore, as long as this mentality is there, Malaysian goods will never be competitive outside.

I suggested the other day that we should produce the simple tools that go with cars, tool kits. Now the immediate reply was that we only sell 100,000 cars a year and that means only 100,000 sets of tools and therefore it is not economic. But if you go to the United States today you are going to see those same tools produced in India, Taiwan, South Korea or Hong Kong. All these countries do not sell a great deal of cars but they go into the tool-making market for export. They investigated the markets in those countries and found there is a market for those things. When you ask a Malaysian to do that kind of thing, the first thing he thinks of is the Malaysian protected market.

How to wake up the private sector?

This is what the Government has been trying to do but everybody starts kicking the ball into the Government's court, so to speak. When I say this, they say the Government should provide this or that, yet at the same time they say let's have less interference by the Government in the private sector. But the moment something happens, they run back to the Government saying 'please protect me'. They are going against their own philosophy. If you want to be the private sector, then work on your own, don't ask the Government. We can give guidance, strategies, but the rest is up to you.

Mr Prime Minister, we have come a quarter of a century in independence. What do you see ... how do you perceive the nation's pace of progress over the next 25 years - economically, politically and socially ?

For the next 25 years I hope, I expect, that the country will accelerate its development without losing sight of its essential Malaysianness, its value systems, its ethics. Generally I foresee a much more prosperous Malaysia - subject of course to the political stability being continuous and we expect it to be continuous.

I see a society that is much more sophisticated, a society that would not be afraid to look outwards - not only think of themselves as Malaysians but to know that the world offers opportunities for them and that they should be doing business with the world in a really big way. This would include the setting up of construction companies, trading corporations, that would be located all over the world. Malaysians doing construction, contracting, in other countries.

1986: As Prime Minister and minister of defence

How real were the rumours of your resignation following the trying events of this past year, specifically regarding the Constitution Amendments Bill?

Well, I denied I was going to resign. There were some members in UMNO who suggested that to solve this (the constitution amendments) impasse, I should resign. But I didn't welcome this kind of solution because I don't think resignation was a solution.

Suppose I resign, what is the solution after that? Give in completely? If it was a matter of giving in completely, I also could give in completely. If, by my resigning, the whole Bill were to be signed, then that would have been a different matter. But there was no such suggestion.

These are the people taking the opportunity to move me out. I am not going to be that easily moved out by a few people. But if all the people, the whole country wants me out, the majority wants me out, I would have no worry about stepping down. I'm not keeping this position as a private property; it is a trust.

Following the Istana Kayangan meeting (Nov 20), there were all sorts of rumours flying about, about you being shot.

That is strategy. One of the things that would certainly make me lose ground is if a big rally is held, especially the one in Johor, and I did not turn up. Then, of course, there will be total disillusionment, and

there were, of course, these phone calls that said that if I turned up, I would be shot. I don't think they would. I don't believe they would. But if I chickened out, the 100,000 people that had turned up would be very disappointment. And my credibility would have been gone.

On the other side, the effect would be different. They say, well, he cannot turn up so there is no point in your coming. Should I turn up expecting 100,000 people and there are 5,000, people would say, look, I have no support in Johor. So this is strategy. I don't believe there was a serious attempt to assassinate me. It is not characteristic of Malaysians to assassinate.

Do you feel exposed and lonely at the top?

Well, if you have decisions that involve studying, you have to choose one. You feel responsible, and you become more involved. There is no way of running away. You feel lonely at such times. I think I have many people who give me a lot of support. I can work with most people. I have that easy personal relationship, and I am not a difficult person to get along with. I can tolerate silly fools for hours, if necessary.

The crab story

I used to tell the story of crabs sold by a man in the Isles of Man. I was watching these crabs march to the sea wall, and some were trying to climb the wall (next to the sea). I said to the man selling crabs: 'If you are not careful, the crabs would climb over the wall and back into the sea.' And the man said, 'No way. Before that crab can climb over the wall, another crab will pull him down.'

So I think, I'm the crab who is up, and at the moment, everybody is trying their best to pull me down. And believe me, the next man who climbs up and holds this position is going to have the same treatment.

1988: As Prime Minister of Malaysia

If you had to begin your premiership all over again, would you do anything differently?

No. I would do exactly the same.

How would you compare Mahathir the Prime Minister to Mahathir the angry young man who wrote the Malay Dilemma?

We're the same people ... only a little older. The only thing is that when you're outside, there is a need to shout in order to be heard, and this gives the impression of anger. But when you're inside, you don't shout at yourself. You know what you're thinking, and you know what you can do. So the impression is that of a quieter, almost different person.

On UMNO politics, could you share with us some of your feelings when you first heard about the challenge from Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah?

I was deeply disappointed because I knew it would definitely cause a split among the top leadership of UMNO. And when you have a split at the top, it's very difficult to hold the bottom together. If the top was united, a split among the bottom, for example, could have been resolved. You can still hold the party together.

That was my main feeling, although I do not doubt that in a democracy, there can be challenges at all levels. But in our tradition, you do not challenge. I could have challenged Datuk Hussein (Onn), but I never did, although I had my difference with him I kept my differences to myself. But here, we see a challenge being made ... several times. At the deputy prime minister's level, at every level.

The recent ISA arrests will, according to some people, stifle criticism, even constructive criticism, altogether. How then, sir, do you view the position of the critic in society?

I've nothing against critics. But those who tell fibs, a lot of lies, who slant everything that they say, who sue the newspapers to create an atmosphere of mistrust and tension - these are the people who should be

eliminated or should not be given face ... or time ... by anyone.

But critics of the government have been there. Even after the ISA arrests, privatisation, for example, was criticised. They (the critics) were not arrested. Real, sound criticism is accepted, and we have taken note of it. Of course, we don't acknowledge it. Maybe they want acknowledgement, I don't know. But the fact is, it is possible to criticise in this country.

Would you say that corruption has become endemic, almost like in some other Asian countries?

It's the level that's important. There is endemic corruption, which is difficult to get rid off, but it's at a very low level. By and large, I think this administration is cleaner than most countries. There may be some black sheep, but this happens in every society.

What about the future of Malaysian politics? Do you think a new, multi-racial polity might emerge?

It might, but it will take a long time and it needs a lot of sincerity on the part of all communities. Firstly, of course, they must accept that there is the need for something like the New Economic Policy, a need to redistribute wealth equitably, to redistribute opportunity equitably. They must then work towards it.

An Ali Baba situation where a Malay is used just for his name is not helping the Malay, the other party or the government. It is not helping anyone. Such people actually sabotage the cause. So, there must be real sincerity until we reach a situation where there is no distinction.

In a Chinese firm, there will be as many Malays as there are Chinese employees. And in the Government, there will be the same kind of distribution. Then, and only then, will multi-ethnic politics become possible.

But as long as there is a private sector unwilling to take in Malays and the Government being forced to take in Malays and other Bumiputeras, there is always that antagonism. And that will not contribute towards multi-ethnic politics.