

Comfort close at hand

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Siti Hasmah: Dr M

hugged me after speech

BY AUDREY EDWARDS

ONE of the first things that Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did when he met his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali after giving his presidential address on Thursday was to give her a hug.

"He knows that I'm (sitting) in front. When he finished his speech I went to his room because I wanted to congratulate him for his wonderful speech. He just hugged me and said, "thank you." It is something I treasure most, being appreciated.

"A husband who appreciates your presence and support for him. This is the most important thing a politician needs from his wife," she said in an exclusive interview at the sidelines of the Umno General Assembly yesterday.

His hugs and words of thanks are also the most precious things for her.

"There are many things that he does. But the most precious to me is when he hugs me and thanks me for being with him," she said fondly.

Dr Siti Hasmah revealed that she feels very sad whenever her husband gets emotional in public as she does not know how to help him in times like these.

"In an assembly like this I can't go onto the stage to help him. But in other places when I'm near him, I'll put my hand on his back to comfort him," she added.

Dr Siti Hasmah revealed that when Dr Mahathir got emotional on Thursday during his presidential address, she softly called out his name and he was able to choke back the tears.

(The Malays believe that when a loved one calls out one's name silently or softly, the person will be comforted and soothed even though he did not hear the call)

Dr Mahathir always gets emotional whenever he talks about the country and nationalism, the wife revealed but she added that the first time he actually cried in public was when he talked about the plight of the Bosnian children several years ago.

"Every time he cries, he is always ashamed of himself



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afterwards but it just shows the public that he is just as human as anybody else.

"If he feels that he can't control his emotions and feels like crying, it doesn't matter one bit to me.

I think husbands in such a situation would want their wives somewhere nearby for comfort.

Even if you cannot do anything, but often, your presence or touch of the hand is comfort enough," she added.

Saying that Thursday's speech was among the best her husband has written, Dr Siti Hasmah added that he was determined to make it worthwhile as he was expressing his thoughts for the last time as president.

"It was simple and he had to make it good. It clearly focused on what he wanted to express to Umno members so that they will remember all the struggles and development that has happened in the past," she emphasised, adding that she had no particular favourite speech by her husband in all these years attending the assembly.

Married for almost 50 years, Dr Siti Hasmah epitomises the perfect Malaysian politician's wife and she credits the lack of conversation about work at home as an important factor to keeping it a happy and tasting marriage.

The 77-year-old first lady said wives with husbands in politics should not interfere with their spouses' activities or decisions.

Although an Umno member, Dr Siti Hasmah has never held any party posts as her husband did not wish her to but she said

that party members knew that she supported them.

Two incidents have stood out in her memory throughout Dr Mahathir's tenure as president - his 'shocking' announcement to resign last year and when he was challenged for the presidency in 1987.

Dr Siti Hasmah also pointed out that it will be almost two days to a year that Dr Mahathir made his announcement about retiring that shocked the whole country.

Taking it easy is definitely on the first couple's agenda when Dr Mahathir steps down in October and Dr Siti Hasmah revealed that she and her husband wanted to write.

"Not a memoir. I have a lot of things to write about, anything that comes to mind. I jot down notes all the time and I will finally have the time to sit down and put it together properly," she said.