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AS the nation braces for the retirement of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, I keep hearing critics of the Prime Minister say they will miss him.

Economist Dr K.S. Jomo is one such person. In an interview with a regional magazine, the Universiti Malaya professor went on record with that sentiment.

He described Dr Mahathir as pragmatic. Being the critic that he is, Dr Jomo insisted that Dr Mahathir's initiatives were "honest attempts" but "misguided and flawed." However, he added: "I will miss him."

Then there is another known critic of Dr Mahathir who had written a book criticising the Proton Saga project but bought one vehicle shortly later.

Yet another who used to be very angry with Dr Mahathir is Dr Chandra Muzaffar. I do not know how he feels about the Prime Minister now but Dr Chandra has certainly turned positive.

There are many of us, whether we wish to admit it or not, who was upset with the Prime Minister at one time or another over the past 22 years. Even some of our Cabinet ministers today had openly rebelled against Dr Mahathir with harsh words.

In fact, I was among the critics. In October 1987, when he ordered the arrest of 119 people comprising parliamentarians, civil rights leaders and social activists, I honestly thought that Dr Mahathir had gone overboard.

My job as a journalist hung in the balance when he revoked the printing permit of *The Star* and two other newspapers. The suspension lasted five months - a rather long period of uncertainty.

Some of us who had earlier campaigned against the Official Secrets Act genuinely believed that democracy was dead. So was press freedom.

In his first five years as Prime Minister, there was no end to the controversies against Dr Mahathir but he carried on doggedly. He was determined to prove many of us wrong.

Years later, as I began covering him as a newsman, I was able to understand his leadership on a more personal level. From there, I became more appreciative of him.

His labour of love had begun to bear fruit. The country's economy became robust and we held our heads high, knowing we were better off than before.

He instilled confidence in us and as more and more foreigners became acquainted with Malaysia, we realised proudly that we were no longer in the backwaters of Borneo. Thanks to Dr Mahathir, the white men now know about Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir stamped his authority because he wanted us to be focused and channel our energies into making Malaysia great.

If there is a price to pay for the development of Malaysia, we were all willing to go along. We began to accept that democracy meant little if we had empty stomachs.

Dr Mahathir is clearly a man ahead of the times, a visionary. On hindsight, we began to see the logic of his actions, even if they might appear unpopular and even irrational to some of us.

Economists like Dr Jomo talked of cronyism

# We will all miss our Dr M



## On The Beat

By WONG CHUN WAI

without realising the practical aspects of doing business. The theory part is always easy.

But not many businessmen in this country can do a decent job, particularly when it involves mega projects and the commitment of huge investments.

Those who had complained about the imposition of tolls on roads must surely appreciate the fine network of highways we have today.

Travelling by road is so much safer and faster now. The toilets at the rest areas today are much better than the horrendous sights that greeted us at coffee shops along trunk roads.

Dr Mahathir did not build monuments named after him but created projects that benefited the people.

It was he who gave the green light to bring cable television to our homes and spoil us with the many channels. And it was Dr Mahathir - regarded by the West as an enemy of the press - who handed over 2,000 printing permits over the last 22 years.

He has been accused of being dictatorial and called a pharaoh by PAS leaders, but that did not stop the opposition party from capturing two states. If elections were rigged, that wouldn't have happened.

Two weeks ago, I travelled with Dr Mahathir to London and Stockholm. Last week, I was in Langkawi to interview him along with three colleagues.

The interview is probably among the last before he steps down on Oct 31. We could sense that there was plenty he wanted to say.

Among them was the Anwar Ibrahim issue. It was obvious he had been pained deeply and he needed to get his feelings off his chest when I asked whether he had been misunderstood during his 22 years as Prime Minister.

It is a blot on his record but it would be terribly unfair to judge him merely on that one sad episode. Surely, there are more pressing concerns of the nation.

He wanted to dwell more about his efforts to get the Malays off the subsidy crutch as "by and large, they have become even more dependent on the government."

There was despair on his face. In his own words, he said he had tried everything but he had lost.

For the majority of Malaysians, however, we can truly say he has done his very best during his time in office.

There is nothing more we as Malaysians could ask for from Dr Mahathir. He has been an extraordinary leader.

For that, we have been lucky. It is still more than three weeks before he retires but I have already begun to miss him.

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