

Ending a labour of love

BY JUNE H.L. WONG

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LANGKAWI: At last, the song can be sung and the man it is directed at can smile and nod in agreement. The song is My Way and the man, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It has been a popular belief that the Frank Sinatra classic is Dr Mahathir's favourite song simply because the lyrics seem so appropriate. But the Prime Minister has, at long last, revealed this is not the case.

He pointed out that it was others who associated the song with him because "people say I like to do things 'my way' which is quite true."

However, he added that since the song begins with "And now the end is near," he used to wonder whether it was a hint for him to step down.

"Now, it's all right. (They) can sing it because the end is really near," he quipped.

This was among the many insights - humorous, poignant, frank and even romantic - gleaned from Dr Mahathir on a wide range of topics during an exclusive interview with The Star here on Thursday.

In the waning days of his 22-year stewardship of the country, the Prime Minister is clearly still a man in a hurry and with much to do; his tight, hectic schedule for the last several months is

testimony to that.

The Star's request for an interview had been put on hold for months because his staff simply could not find a time for it. When notice suddenly came from his office that a slot had finally been arranged - 8.30am in Langkawi where he was attending the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (Lima) 2003 exhibition - a team of four editors was quickly despatched.

As experienced editors who have all covered the Prime Minister's functions at one time or another, we felt we knew our subject well and had prepared our questions confidently.

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But as the hour of the interview drew closer, we were not spared trepidations. The dull, wet morning didn't help warm our spirits.

After all; Dr Mahathir's legendary no-nonsense style and reputation of not suffering fools gladly precede him and as his daughter Datin Paduka Marina had remarked, "Everyone knows that if you are doing a presentation to the PM, you had better know your stuff or you're dead."

While we were not making a presentation, we were going to pose questions to a man who is a veteran at taking thousands of questions from a battery of reporters who ranged from being servile to hostile; a man who could turn press conferences into disasters by giving short, one-word answers to every question.

What would his mood be like?

Then again, he is also known to be a kind and considerate man, sensitive to others who are awed by him. The day before, his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, in another exclusive interview shared how the Prime Minister had gone out of his way to put at ease a visitor who had long sought an appointment to see him and when he finally got it, was so terrified that he was shaking from head to toe at the meeting.

So what would be our fate?

The interview was to take place in the presidential suite of the swanky Awana Porto Malai hotel. We arrived 30 minutes early to allow our cameramen who were to shoot video and stills to set up their equipment. About 15 minutes before the appointed time, we were told to go up to the fourth floor.

Shortly after, Dr Mahathir entered, looking very fresh and smart in a well-tailored buttoned-up Nehru suit in light

pinstriped grey which he wore with a crisp white shirt. We took our seats in the spacious lounge of the suite with a generous balcony overlooking the sea. Executive editor Datuk Wong Chun Wai introduced us.

Taking one look at us, he said, "Very multiracial, very Malaysian team" in reference to the fact that the team comprised two Chinese, one Malay and one Indian while our cameramen were Chinese and Malay.

It was interesting that he had quickly made such an observation. Immediately, we sensed he was curious about us and was clearly in a genial mood.

Alert and relaxed, he smiled easily, laughed at our attempts at humour, teased us back and took gentle potshots at us.

For example, when Wong asked him how a 70-year-old man could take such a punishing work schedule, Dr Mahathir replied with a smile: "It's a labour of love. When you are in

love, you are capable of all kinds of gymnastics."

He added that if you had an opportunity to do something for your country, for your own people and for your own religion, I think you would do it without thinking too much about the strain that you impose on yourself."

Dr Mahathir revealed that what he could not handle were people, including "friends" and relatives, trying to use him and his position.

For the first time, he spoke frankly of the "burden" of such expectations which also taxed his time tremendously.

If-friends have been disappointing, his family, fortunately, has not. His children, said Dr Mahathir, are understanding and they don't "come whining to me, (or) give any trouble."

He described Dr Siti Hasmah as being not only a wife but also a friend and supporter who had shown a lot of patience and understanding.

"I like having her around. Sometimes, she is not able to follow me when I go abroad but that is very seldom. I miss her a lot then," he said, looking slightly bashful, as this is the first time he has spoken so openly of his need for her.

Asked whether people had misunderstood his words or actions in the past, Dr Mahathir responded without hesitation: "During the Anwar thing," referring to the shocking and controversial sacking of his then deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim on Sept 2, 1998.

He spoke about the pain he felt when he had to dismiss Anwar whom he considered a friend.

And if people think he is a vengeful person, then several of his current Cabinet ministers would not be where they are as they were against him at one time. "It's part of politics," he said.

As for his retirement plans, Dr Mahathir said he would

write his memoirs and, in his typical self-deprecating humour added, "It may become useful for other people to learn from all the mistakes I have made."

He is adamant that he will not be a backseat driver, directing the Government. "The Government can go on and do what is directed by the leader."

He is convinced that the transition of power will be smooth as he had spent time putting "things in order."

The time from June last year when he announced his retirement until now had also allowed the people to adjust and accept the inevitable and hence "I don't think it (his retirement) will have much effect on the people."

□ This interview is also available in Asia News Network (ANN) member newspapers and their respective websites whose URL addresses can be found at www.asianewsnet.net