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The most difficult episode in Dr M's political career

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LANGKAWI: For Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the most difficult episode in his long tenure as prime minister was to learn the terrible truth about a friend and to remove him from office.

Although the crisis occurred five years ago, the anguish still haunts him, as was evident in the way he spoke about the sacking of his former deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in

September 1998.

"I had to take an action which I hated very much because he was, after all, a friend. But for the sake of the country, I had to (do it) and forget about friendship and about my becoming unpopular," he told *The Star* in an exclusive interview here last week.

He also described how his actions were misunderstood by people who thought he was being vengeful and how the crisis put a strain on him.

Dr Mahathir also explained that the subsequent action of charging Anwar in court on sodomised corruption charges was not his decision.

"The police had to take action like they had acted against other ministers (who had broken the law). I cannot tell the police that 'he is deputy prime minister or ex-deputy prime minister so you cannot touch him'. The police took action but the people say that I directed the police and all that. It is not

easy to direct the police. If you try that, immediately it will be known to everybody," he said.

The Prime Minister dealt at length on how his own immediate family had "suffered" simply because they were his children. He said he had not given them any support at all.

This was unlike other distant relatives, who, he said, expected favours and support from him. And with his imminent retirement, their demands were getting worse.

"They think: 'Now that he is going to retire in October, we had better get these things quickly'," he said wryly, adding that this was the worst part of being Prime Minister.

For these and other insights, see the full text of the final part of the interview on pages 6, 8, and 10.