

It's lonely at the top

SUN 16 OCT 2003

PUTRAJAYA: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave a rare glimpse into life at the top, admitting he felt most alone when he came up with unconventional ideas that made people uncomfortable.

He cited the economic crisis in 1997 as one such time, when people were confused over what he wanted to do.

"People sometimes doubt whether we can do it or not. So at such times, we feel a little lonely." He said he ended up working with a "small group" of people and he had to convince them that pegging the ringgit and controlling the movement of capital would not ruin Malaysia's reputation and economy.

"But I managed to convince a sufficient number of them and somehow or other, we pushed it through although the Governor of Bank Negara and his deputy resigned," the prime minister said in an interview with *Bernama* on Tuesday. He said that he did not normally talk much about this and looked a little uncomfortable with the question about how lonely it was at the top.

But Mahathir smiled wryly and said once these unconventional methods started working, he felt less lonely because "people will come round (to) thinking our way again".

Contrary to belief that he was at his loneliest when a faction within Umno, led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, challenged him in the party elections in 1987, Mahathir said at that time, he was not alone.

"In 1987, as you know, I came through

because the majority supported me. Umno was declared illegal but we managed to rebuild the party and bring the majority back into Umno.

"In the 1990 and 1995 elections, we won with a bigger majority. Although there were a few against me, the majority was for me."

He recounted that when he first became prime minister, the first thing he asked was that the government should examine everything it was doing and determine whether these were the right things to do.

"We changed many things. Previously, the government had decided that it would not work with the private sector. We examined this and found that it was not productive. So we decided on Malaysia Incorporated."

He said government companies and departments which were not doing well were privatised.

These unconventional methods then were greeted with doubt and hence, he felt alone. But ultimately, when these ideas started bearing fruit, people started coming around, said the man responsible for such world-class projects like the Petronas Twin Towers, the KL International Airport, Multimedia Super Corridor, Putrajaya and Proton.

Mahathir also spoke on why there should be a common weekend for all states, the failure of Perwaja Steel and his being labelled an "ultra" when he first took office.