

Samy: Indians gained much under Mahathir

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"I WILL miss him a lot ... I'll miss him a lot," said Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu in a voice choked with emotion. He took a while to compose himself.

"Sorry, I am very emotional when talking about him," the MIC president said when met at his office in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, talking about Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement as Prime Minister today.

Samy Vellu, who is one of Mahathir's closest aides, describes his boss as a man "with a very dynamic personality who has brought a paradigm shift to this nation".

Among those who benefited most are the country's 1.2 million Indians who today hold RM6 billion in equities.

Samy Vellu said it was only with Mahathir's arrival that there was a direct connection between a prime minister and the Indian community.

He said the first thing Mahathir did for Indians when he came to power was to give RM8 million for the establishment of Tafe College which gave youths better opportunities to obtain higher technical qualifications.

"Before that, you apply to government technical college, you won't even get five places. With Tafe, we have 2,000 Indians studying."

The Tafe College allocation came at a crucial time when Samy Vellu was facing opposition in MIC.

"He said 'this money is not given to project the image of Samy Vellu because he is contesting the election, but this has been agreed upon before'."

Samy Vellu said Mahathir has personally seen to the construction of 60 Tamil schools - built outside the framework of the Education Ministry.

He also gave RM50 million for the Medical University in Sungai Petani.

"Although our university costs RM400 million, he could have said I can only give RM5 million. But he gave RM50 million with the view that we make a lot of complaints that we don't get places in university."

Samy Vellu also reminded Indians that the quota system for mandatory non-bumiputra entry into public universities was increased during Mahathir's time.

"It went up to 10% (from 8%). Later on when the question of merit came, it was unfortunate that Indian

students could not make it," he said, adding that it was also during Mahathir's time that 1,500 places in matriculation were given to non-Malays.

He praises Mahathir's respect for other religions and credits him for the re-siting of many Hindu temples. When a temple has been sitting on a place for a long time, he will say 'don't touch it'."

He added that Hindu temples receive RM1 million a year from the government on Mahathir's directive.

One of the things he admires in the prime minister is his capacity and stamina for work.

"He calls me from time to time, to ask me whether this is done, whether that is done. It also gave me more stamina to work and to prove to him that things are being done. That is the attitude I've learnt from him."

Samy Vellu said cabinet meetings are hardly the sombre affair people think they are. Most of the time he and his colleagues go in with a lot of suggestions after "the beatings" they got from the public. Some presentations are even funny as they make their cases to the PM.

"His style was he listens intently and patiently. He will not intervene. In the end, he will say 'OK, this is the decision I make'."

Mahathir, says Samy Vellu, always makes a decision in favour of good presentations. But never has he said 'I am the prime minister, I will do what I like.'"

He says he hates those who say that they could not say anything in the cabinet when the prime minister is chairing the meeting.

"People who know him

will understand who he is," Samy Vellu said, adding that in the 22 years Mahathir has been prime minister he has never seen him lose his temper in the cabinet.

Many non-Malays had reservations about Mahathir when he came to power due to him being misconstrued as an "ultra", but not Samy Vellu.

"This is a country of many races. Leaders representing a particular race must have the guts to talk about what is happening in his race.

"I think Dr Mahathir's views on the Malay community and the poverty they have suffered is a very correct view. And he was branded an ultra because of that."

Samy Vellu was attending a wedding in Morib when Mahathir announced his resignation at the Umno General Assembly last year.

"I was supposed to give the *thali* to the bridegroom. I even forgot that. I told the bridegroom's father 'I'm very sorry, I can't be here I have to run to Kuala Lumpur because something serious has happened'."

Despite the initial shock, Samy Vellu was confident that Mahathir would not leave hastily. But in his heart, he knew there was no stopping Mahathir because he knew that once the man has made up his mind, there is no going back.

Welcoming the fifth prime minister, Samy Vellu acknowledged that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has large shoes to fill.

"In this century and the last, there is only one Mahathir you can see. You can never see anymore Mahathirs."