

From a nervous start in public life nearly three decades ago when Dr Mahathir was first appointed to the Cabinet, Dr Siti Hasmah has grown in stature and confidence to become the perfect First Lady, writes JUNE H.L. WONG.

# His leading lady

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She has been the perfect First Lady, keeping up with the energetic and dynamic Prime Minister every step of the way and never putting a wrong foot. So it will be no surprise that Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, 77, will be as deeply missed by the *rakyat* as her husband when he retires. Even though she has always been contented to play the supporting role, she has carved her own areas of interest such as women and children's health – as befitting a doctor – and on the international level, she has represented Malaysia at conferences and organisations on women's rights and rural women's economic empowerment and other issues. Her love for badminton and support for the national players at tournaments is also well-known. Visible and articulate, she has certainly made her presence felt without being seen as dominating or calculating. Unlike other first ladies, like Rosalynn Carter or Hillary Clinton, Dr Siti Hasmah has never been accused of interfering with politics or trying to influence her husband.

Yet, she is surely his closest confidante and "pillar of strength", as her son Datuk Mohkzani Mahathir describes her. And according to daughter Datin Paduka Marina, Dr Siti Hasmah, like her husband, views her position and responsibilities as a "kind of national duty".

"She's always given him her 100% support. If she disagrees, she does it privately. I think he tells her most things; his decision to resign last year (which took everyone by surprise) was an exception," says Marina.

Mokhzani calls her "the mother of all mothers" and he is in awe of

her. But ask Dr Siti Hasmah what policies she might have had a hand in shaping, she will reply: "Not much but I am very happy and satisfied with what I have done."

Her proudest achievements are in helping set up a preparatory course at Intan for the wives of ambassadors and the diplomatic corps and her work with Bakti, the club for the wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

She promoted the need for such a course after she experienced first hand, the problems among the wives at embassies and high commissions in Europe on a vacation in the late 1970s.

"We were going from one place

to another and I was meeting the wives of the ambassadors and the other members of the diplomatic corps in the embassies.

"There was a host of problems – there was no cooperation or coordination because they had never been properly informed of their roles. It