

# 'Daddy knows best'

SOME TIME IN THE EARLY 70'S, a Malay doctor from Alor Star took his young family on a boat ride. It was no ordinary ride and indeed, it was no ordinary boat.

It was a boat he had built and the journey was from Kuala Kedah to Pulau Payar. Out at sea, the boat, *Mokhzani*, a downscaled version of a model in magazine *Popular Mechanics*, steadily headed for the island. But it was not alone. Three fishing boats accompanied it. Inside these boats were some very nervous fishermen.

You see, *Mokhzani* had no anchor and while the good doctor was very confident of its seaworthiness, the fishermen were a little concerned.

The fishermen were not about to let anything happen to the doctor and his family who were well-known not only to these fishermen, but to the residents of Alor Star.

Alor Star, after all, was not a big town. And Che Det was a well-loved doctor.

Needless to say, Che Det and his family anchored safely at the island and sailed safely home — many times over.

He was known as Che Det to his family, friends and the people of Alor Star. But to the rest of the world, he is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who, after 22 years as Prime Minister of Malaysia, bids a fond farewell.

And yachting is a passion in which he will be able to indulge in during retirement. It is not a newfound hobby. Dr Mahathir has been passionate about boats, boat-building and the sea for a long time.

"We grew up loving the sea," said Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir, 39, the fifth of Dr Mahathir's seven children.

He said his father was so eager to take *Mokhzani* out to sea even though it was without an anchor. When the local fishermen knew about the anchorless boat, they were worried for Dr Mahathir and his family's safety and decided to accompany

*Strict, doting, impartial. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is all these and more to his children.*

**NURAINA A. SAMAD** finds out more about Dr Mahathir, the family man.

NST 31 OCT 2003

him to the island.

Mukhriz said *Mokhzani* was not the first boat his father built. He had earlier built *Marina*, which was smaller.

Both boats were named after his children.

Mukhriz says his father is someone who is passionate about "building, making and designing things".

Dr Mahathir had also designed a jetty in Sungai Kedah. The children did not think much of their father's passion then. In fact, they accepted it as their way of life. They were after all living their young life in a small northern town. Being close to nature and working with one's hands were part and parcel of country life.

Mukhriz also remembers his father's fascination with fibreglass with which he experimented, using it on top of wood to design decorative but functional items.

"That was way back in the 70s. He must have been the first Malaysian to experiment with fibreglass," he said.



remembering that there were fibreglass paperweights of many designs, including one with a purple seahorse.

He can now look back in amazement at his father's hobbies which turned out not to be simple distractions of a busy doctor/politician. They were the seeds from which his vision grew.

Marina, Mirzan, Melinda, Mokhzani and Mukhriz — the five older children of Dr Mahathir and his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali— spent their childhood in Alor Star. The two younger ones — Mazhar and Maizura — were raised in Kuala Lumpur.

All five older ones are married with children while Mazhar and Maizura are in university.

The children are close-knit despite their parents' busy schedule as doctors. Dr Mahathir, as a politician, made the best of his spare time with his family.

For Mukhriz and his older siblings, Alor Star was "our whole world". Kuala Lumpur then was "that very big city" far south which they would travel to by train.

Train rides with Daddy, Mummy and the whole family were always exciting and which he never failed to look forward to.

"Before boarding the train in Butterworth, I got to buy my favourite comics. It was a lot of fun," said Mukhriz.

In KL, the Mahathir family would either

be at their relatives' homes or at well-known hotels along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

Later on, it was the children's first visit abroad to London that, according to Mukhriz, "was impactful".

"It opened up our minds. London was a totally different world. It was not Alor Star, Penang or Kuala Lumpur. We learnt a lot from that first visit," he said, in an interview at his office at Plaza Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur.

Mukhriz, who runs his own company, is married to Datin Norzieta Zakaria. They have three children — Meera Alyanna, eight, Misha Hakeem, five and Melia Serena, two.

For the Mahathir children, it is easier to ask them what their father was not, than what he was, as their dad when they were growing up.

Certainly, he was not a regular dad. Dr Mahathir, to begin with, was very busy as a doctor and then a politician. Later on, of course, as a Cabinet Minister and Prime Minister.

But it was clear that as a father, Dr Mahathir tried his best to spend as much time with his children as he possibly could and provide them a childhood that was as normal as could be.

For Mokhzani, 42, fourth in the family, the weekends spent in the *dusun* (orchard)

in Titi Gajah, Kedah when he was a child were precious and memorable — so much so that he considers himself a country boy.

"I really enjoyed the weekends we spent in our *dusun*, picking rambutans.

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# A dotting grandfather

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mangosteens and durians.”

Businessman Mokhzani, who was Umno Youth treasurer and Merbok Umno Youth chief, is the only one of Dr Mahathir's children who is involved in politics.

The natural assumption is, of course, that he turns to his father for advice on politics and that his father deals directly with him.

This, Mokhzani said, could not be further from the truth. Yes, they are close as father and son but no, Dr Mahathir does not discuss Umno matters with Mokhzani.

“When I was Umno Youth treasurer and Merbok Umno Youth chief, I dealt directly with Tun Daim (who was the Umno treasurer and Merbok Umno chief). My father dealt directly with Hishammuddin (Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein).”

Mokhzani, who is now Kedah Umno treasurer, said Dr Mahathir was “very clear about roles and responsibilities”.

“He gives us the respect of being what we are,” he said.

He said he respected his father's sense of fairness in dealing with matters that affected him and his siblings.

When Dr Mahathir hears something unpleasant about any of them, he will call them up first to ask for clarification.

“He is very professional. He would ask

“Are you involved?” If yes, he will ask what the situation is. If no, then, fine. That's it.”

Mokhzani, of course, being a businessman, had, on occasions, such conversations with Dr Mahathir.

So, did Dr Mahathir impose his will on his children's academic, career and marriage choices?

On education, except for Mukhriz, the rest were left pretty much on their own to decide what they wanted to do.

As far as Mukhriz was concerned, it was a case of “daddy knows best.”

By his own admission, he was not “quite focused” then and his father probably saw that he needed some pushing.

“It was at the time when he had just launched the Look East Policy. I had just finished my SPM at the Mara Junior Science College in Pengkalan Chepa in 1981.

“I went to see him in his study at home. I told him of my interest in music. He looked at me, in quite an intimidating manner, and said, ‘You are going to Japan to study Business Administration’. It was clear that I didn't have much of a say. I had no choice in the matter.”

Today, Mukhriz, the businessman, owes much to his Japanese education. “I have no regrets”, he remarked with a broad grin.

On marriage, Dr Mahathir had, for a long time, left it to his children on the right time

they felt they should settle down, and with the partner of their choice.

But there was probably a limit to his patience. His sons decided to end their bachelorhood after they each received a note from him some time in 1992 about “family and family life”.

“He must have been concerned after our two sisters got married and there seemed to be no sign of us going the same way. So, he wrote us a note. The next year, Mirzan got married; the following year, Mukhriz; and then me,” said Mokhzani, who is married to Datin Mastisa Mohamed. They have four children — Marisa Hasmah, seven, Masira Yasmin, five, Mahathir Mohamed, three and Melisa Lara, one.

Marisa, who was with her daddy and mummy at the interview, said she loved her “Tok Det” very much.

If he was a strict father to his children — “no TV after 9pm” — he is now the dotting granddad to his 15 grandchildren.

“Tok Det always gives me a hug when I see him at his house. I like going with him on the boat at the Putrajaya lake,” Marisa enthused.

Marina, Dr Mahathir's eldest child, said that she is the product of her father's upbringing.

So, if he regards her as being “very liberal”, then she credits him for having taught her to open her mind and her horizons, be independent, have faith in her capabilities and be strong.

Marina, a newspaper columnist and social activist, said she also learnt the benefits of discipline from her father.

One thing she remembers well was how strict her father was about school.

“Going to school was non-negotiable. We would get a spanking if we refused to go to school. We really would be spanked,” Marina said.

But that was as far as her father would go in punishing his children and only for when it came to schooling.

Today, his children will get a telling-off if they so much as lay a finger on their

own children.

“He would say, ‘Don't touch my grandchild,’ remarked Marina, who has two daughters — Ineza Melanie and Shaista Mayada.

Now, as the nation prepares itself for Dr Mahathir's retirement to civilian life, his children are, undoubtedly, looking forward to making up for “lost” time when he and Dr Siti Hasmah move to their three-bedroom home at the Mines.

As Prime Minister, he was not able to spend as much time with his children as he would have liked, especially since he and Dr Siti Hasmah moved to Putrajaya.

Whenever the children wanted to see him, they had to check with his office.

“We don't get VIP treatment when it comes to making an appointment with him,” said Marina who, when desperate, would send him a letter “because that's the only way I can get to him.”

Marina said they hope to see more of him after he retires. A holiday abroad “with everyone — children and grandchildren” is being planned.

“And that will really be nice,” she said.

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