Siti Hasmah may take up cookery classes

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PUTRAJAYA: Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali is seriously thinking of signing up for cookery classes to get acquainted with modern kitchen equipment now that she is getting a well-deserved rest after 22 years as First Lady.

"It has been a long, long time since I cooked. I cannot remember the last time. I learnt to cook not by the spoonful or by the gram but by *jemput-jemput* (rough estimation of ingredients). That was how my mother taught me.

"We didn't have any blenders at the time, so *menggiling-giling semua* (grind everything). Now if you put me with blenders and microwaves, I would really not know what to do," she quipped in an interview on Thursday.

When asked what she would like to cook for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Dr Siti Hasmah smiled and said: "His favourite – *sambal ikan bilis dengan kacang*. That is what I used to cook over the weekends sometimes at the hostel driver's house for both of us.

"When we went out, we took bread and *sambal ikan bilis*," she said of her courting days with Dr Mahathir when they were medical students at the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore.

The couple married on Aug 5, 1956. They have seven children and 15 grandchildren.

Dr Siti Hasmah gamely related how she learnt the rudiments of cooking from her mother during the Japanese Occupation.

"I think I had to start learning how to boil water and then how to cook eggs – half-boiled eggs and so forth. Once I got back to school again and then Singapore, *habislah* (finished). When I came back, I didn't have the opportunity to really cook," she added.

Those hoping that the couple will have an open house this Hari Raya will be disappointed because Dr Mahathir and wife have decided to devote that special time to their family.

"We would like to go away somewhere for Hari Raya with the family because it is they who have missed us all these years during Hari Raya," she said.

While on the subject of Hari Raya, Dr Siti Hasmah related how she used to personally pick out and pack goodies like biscuits from Saidin Othman at Pekan Rabu (now known as Che Det Mall) in Alor Star for guests coming to the family's open house. This tradition continued at Seri Perdana in Kuala Lumpur and only stopped when the couple moved to the new official residence in Putrajaya.

"I did it myself the first year in 2000. It was terrible. The domestic manager, Sharani (Abdul Rahman), brought his wife and daughters to help me in Seri Perdana from *sahur* to pack 40,000 to 50,000 packets of goodies from Alor Star.

"We didn't arrange for catering at the time because I didn't know what to expect. After that we didn't do it," she said.

On the long-awaited holiday that the couple started yesterday, leaving for Spain just a day after Dr Mahathir had stepped down from office, Dr Siti Hasmah said: "He wants to go where his mind can relax."

Previously, in an interview at the sidelines of the 10th Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit, the former First Lady said jokingly that she doubted she would get tired of her husband's face after his retirement.

"I don't think I will ever get fed up of seeing his face. Over the past 22 years, I sometimes scarcely saw him.

"Hopefully, I won't get fed up and he won't get fed up of me too," she had said.

On Thursday, the affable Dr Siti Hasmah was also quick to add that while they were looking forward to retirement, they were also sad.

"We are sad not because we are leaving the *jawatan* (position) but because of the reaction of the *rakyat* (people) – the students, young people, adults, everybody. We realise that we have very, very good friends. People appreciate him. That is what is important to him.

"Not to thank him profusely. They have to thank the Almighty that He has blessed Malaysia and the people here. But he is very happy to know that they appreciate what he has done. That is why he is emotional," she stressed.

On her tenure as First Lady, Dr Siti Hasmah said she was not going to miss the position as she had held it for too long.

She added, however, that she had gained many friends and learnt a lot during the time.

"It was an educational process, not only nationally but internationally," she said.

Asked if she would continue being active in charity work or women's issues, she said that while she enjoyed being with those involved in these areas, taking things easy was going to be an important factor for her.

"There is a limit to what one can do. It will not be the same," she added with a smile.