

Retired or not, Mahathir is still

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Final part of the Mahathir interview

The last time *The Star* interviewed Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it was in the waning days of his prime ministership. It has been one year since. How has he adjusted to life in retirement? The same team of four editors – Wong Chun Wai, June H.L.Wong, K. Parkaran and Mergawati Zulfakar, who met him last year in Langkawi – talked to Tun Mahathir last week in his office on the 86th floor of the Petronas Twin Towers. He is now Petronas advisor. Security was tight and we had to take four elevators before we were ushered into a futuristic looking reception area that had orange leather sofas under a glass dome. As we moved the sofas together and set up our cameras and tape recorders, our chatter echoed rather loudly, thanks to the dome acoustics.

THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Tun, the current presidential debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry has caught the attention of many of us. Both of them seem to spend a lot of time on terrorism and who is responsible for it. They point their fingers at Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden but neither talks about the root causes of terrorism or the way the Americans have handled the situation. Your comments please.

They are in total denial and also they don't see they have anything to lose by not admitting the true causes of terrorism. The main thing is to win the election. And if you annoy the Jewish group which is a very strong integrated group, then you are going to lose the election. If you mention Palestine as the root cause, you will lose the election. So neither Kerry nor Bush will mention Palestine. But surprisingly the electorate appears to be willing to accept a person who told a blatant lie and to elect a liar as their president. I think this augurs badly for the world as America is a world power.

difficult for millions of people to change theirs. So he is going to face a problem and I wish him all the very best.

In our country, in the past people actually tried to avoid becoming a leader because of the responsibilities but now everybody wants to be a leader to the point of using money. So we are going to have weaker and weaker leaders. A good leader is one who stands up for his principles even if it results in his being thrown out of the party. But today we find everybody is scared of losing his opportunity and that is bad. Somebody who is willing, at all costs, to become a leader is a bad leader. You should not choose him at all.

Tun, in this region, there are cases of fathers and sons in politics. You have Lee Hsien Loong taking over in Singapore and in Malaysia, we have sons of former prime ministers in line to take over the leadership. In the case of DAP, Lim Guan Eng has taken over from Kit Siang. What are your views on this?

Well, I notice that in many countries, Japan for example, certain families are involved in politics. I suppose it is because of

(Laughs) I don't know, I am shy to mention.

Which leaders have influenced you?

The person who has the most impact (on me) was the Prophet of Islam. Because here is a man who not only preached the religion but changed the value system of the ignorant Arabs – the *jahiliyas* – so that eventually they were able to build a great civilisation that lasted 1,300 years. This is, to me, the greatest model.

There are others: I love Peter the Great who changed the Russians but not all the way because he chopped off the heads of so many of his generals. That part I don't like.

There are many others who changed their countries – Emperor Meiji of Japan, King Chulalongkorn of Siam, and China's Deng Xiaoping, Chiang Kai Shek and South Korea's Park Chung Hee. They were all authoritarians but they were the ones who changed the lives of their people. Here, I was fortunate that I was elected by the people. But if you are elected by the people, you feel insecure because you may not be re-elected. These people were able to

The American people are, by and large, very ignorant and know nothing about the rest of the world. They think that America is the world. Yet they are the people who will decide who will be the most powerful man in the world. They are not looking at the outside world, only looking at themselves. They will accept a liar. They will accept (British Prime Minister Tony) Blair, and I am sure they will accept Bush; they have already accepted (Australian Prime Minister John) Howard who told a blatant lie.

Will it make any difference who wins the US elections?

It won't make any difference.

Do you think Bush will win?

Yes, I think so.

LEADERSHIP, PAST & PRESENT
The region has seen a leadership change in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. How do you see the new breed of leaders; does it augur well for the region?

First, I must congratulate Indonesia because they held an election without any violence; this was a big election for them and they elected a leader of their choice. But his (President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's) task is going to be very difficult because it's one thing for one man to change his attitude, it's quite dif-

the opportunities or whatever.

I tried during my time to make sure that my children did not take advantage of my position to enter politics. On the other hand, if they are truly interested in politics you cannot really stop them.

But ultimately, it's the people who decide. If they don't want so-and-so because he is a son of so-and-so, it's up to them. In a democracy, it is the people who decide. Of course in some countries, there is no true democracy. Then it is very sad if you confine the leadership to your family.

But in a true democracy, if the people decide to elect someone because he is a descendent of so-and-so, then it's the people who are in the wrong. I always believe that people get the government they deserve. If you don't express your opinion truly, then you deserve to get whatever.

Were you furious when you were compared to Stalin by Anwar Ibrahim in a CNN interview?

Well, I don't care who people compare me with. They can compare me with anybody but for everyone who compares me with Stalin, there are others who compare me with much more likeable leaders.

Can you name some of these likeable leaders?

in his element

At one time, Sabah gave out so many datukships that it became quite meaningless. So during my time, all the rulers once agreed to limit the number of these awards except for Pahang. Pahang said it was not going to be bound by any federal decision.

Personally, I feel if you want to give value to anything, it must be limited. It's like a Ferrari limited edition. If you produce a million Ferrari cars, nobody will care about buying a Ferrari. Before, if you threw a stone you hit one Datuk. Now, you throw a stone you hit two Datuks. *(Laughter)*

When I became DPM, I was offered a datukship. I said sorry, I could not accept with the excuse that my own Sultan had not given me a title yet. And then my Sultan gave me one. After that, I could not refuse anymore! We have to give value to these titles. Otherwise we are going to have murderers holding these titles.

I was also offered an honorary doctorate when I was in office. I refused saying I only would accept it after I retired. Now what excuse do I have?

Is that why you have been accepting so many doctorates of late?

Yes. If I accept one and reject another, they will ask what's wrong with us. So I have to accept all the doctorates.

There is a trend now in Malaysia for certain businessmen to try and get not only the Datuk title but also a doctorate by dubious means so that they can call themselves Datuk Dr so-and-so. What do you think of this trend of craving for titles at any cost?

If you have an honorary doctorate, you are not entitled to call yourself a doctor. But here some of them put the Dr in front. That's wrong.

are willing to go abroad and compete.

You yourself are quite a risk taker, considering the way you went to the Antarctica and horse riding in the Andes in Argentina. These were risky ventures considering your age and position. Did you ever think about that?

That was no great feat. I think this is something you cultivate by saying you can do it. When I was Prime Minister, I had to make decisions. Decision-making means weighing the pros and cons. I didn't go to Antarctica or ride in the mountains to risk my life. There was the possibility of course that the horse might slip and go down the ravine. But I had confidence in the horse *(laughs)*.

IN CONCLUSION...

Is life less stressful now?

People say that I look less stressed now and I suppose yes. I don't have too many things to decide on. One of the things that had always been a burden to me was the constant appeals from people to do things for them which I knew would be wrong. At the most I could act as a postman and pass them on to the departments. I never interfered in such things. Some of them credit me with helping them but it was the officers who made the decisions.

Do people still do that?

No, not anymore. One or two still come to me but I tell them I am not the Prime Minister and I can't even write letters now to officers in the government departments. It is wrong. Now they accept it. When I went to Alor Star as Prime Minister, there would be more than 100 people, some from as far as Johor, waiting in line to hand me brown envelopes. That was stressful to me.

THE MALAYSIA BOLEH SPIRIT

You have inspired many Malaysians to achieve great things under your administration. But in the process, some people have reduced themselves to making the longest satay and the tallest lantern....

I suppose it is fun for them and they want to get into the book of records. We are the only country with a book of records. Some are genuine and some cannot think of anything remarkable so they do this kind of things.

On the other hand, there are the few who contribute towards having faith in ourselves and building our self-confidence. People like Azhar Mansor who sailed around the world solo, N. Mohandas and M. Magendran who climbed Mt Everest, Malik Mydin who swam across the English Channel, the people who dropped over the North Pole. Now I am hoping that Sharifah (Mazlina Syed Abdul Kadir) will complete her 1,000km journey across the South Pole.

So there are people who are serious. And the constant stress on "you can do it if you try" has paid off. If you don't try, of course you wouldn't know if you can do it. By and large, Malaysians are now much more confident, they

Last Raya, you were not around as you left the country soon after handing over the reins. Are you going to be around this year?

I will be around but I don't intend to announce this as I cannot handle so many people. Last Raya I went to Phuket. I had to learn how to enjoy Raya. For other people, Raya was a holiday but for me it used to be work, I worked harder than everybody else.

Does that mean you are much happier now?

Well, happy in a way, not happy in another way. Sometimes, certain things are done in a way they should not have been done or certain things done should not have been done.

What are the certain things?

No, I don't want to tell. *(Smiles)*

Tun, if we go back to 30 years, would you want to be Prime Minister again?

If I was younger, yes. If you ask me to be Prime Minister now, I think I have earned my rest and I am being let out to fallow, you know, like old horses.



Video link: <http://thestar.com.my/mmedia/video>