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Behind the controversial methods and bluntness

Mention his name, and the words "forthright", "controversial", and "relentless" come to mind. He has criticised governments, disagreed with the world and demolished anything that stood in his way often through sheer force of will.

Probably for this reason, the word "rational" is seldom used to describe the Prime Minister, despite the fact that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is very much a man of method.

"My training as a doctor is very important because a doctor is very methodical," he says.

"I once told The Economist, Arthur Conan Doyle was a doctor and he created Sherlock Holmes and the way Sherlock Holmes solves problems is the way a doctor would solve his patients' problems."

That ultimately is the main similarity between the Great Detective, literature's icon of rationality, and the man of reason Dr Mahathir feels he is.

In one instance, Holmes annoys a police inspector when he finds a clue, a match, that would have been impossible to find unless he was looking for it.

"It was invisible, buried in the mud. I only saw it because I was looking for it," says the sleuth. And he knew what to find because he had thought about what inevitably must be present.

Is that what drove Dr Mahathir to break with the conventions of the financial world, five years ago when money and currencies were roiling in uncertainty?

Rationality, the Prime Minister says, was his key to resolving the ringgit's troubles during the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98, and buffering Malaysia's fragile economy from the merciless world.

"I thought very deeply about this. I tried to understand currency trading because if you didn't, you can't do it.

"I had this idea of people carrying bags of money across the border, but nothing like that happens at all. The money is here all the time. Gradually, I began to understand how currency trading is carried out."

His eyes twinkle, and he smiles broadly as he speaks; a hint there was no way he would have backed down from the challenge of dismantling a major Asian currency, the ringgit, despite global disapproval.

He displays some measure of the same verve when talking about another potentially major monetary development - the E-Dinar - which reflects his present thoughts on currencies and the gold standard.

Dr Mahathir takes a Yugoslavian currency note out of his slim, black wallet. Its denomination, 500 billion dinar, is the highest ever issued in the world.

"It was worth 12 US cents when it was first issued in 1993. It is worthless now... shows that paper has no intrinsic value."

It is telling that one of the few books on financial matters that he has read is Gregory Millman's "Vandal's Crown", a book which describes how currency traders move billions of dollars around the world.

"I buy a lot of history books. I don't read so much of the people who say they are experts on economics and all that."

Money is not the only matter that he examines with great care. Looking out the span of plate glass in his Finance Ministry office, he tsks at what he sees.

"I wanted it to be like the Champs Elysees, a long boulevard lined with lots of big trees. In fact, when they started three years ago, I told them to get the trees in first.

"They've put all these tiles, which is nice but only from above. And it means there's a lot of reflective surface, and it can get very hot."

His interest in the smallest of details was evident even 22 years ago, when he first assumed the office of Prime Minister. And method was the first thing he applied to organise the country's administration.

"Immediately upon my appointment, I introduced certain methods in the administration such as the work manual, desk file and flow charts... there was no system before.

"In the past, it was not systematic. People expected a government officer to know what he is doing without any references.

"The only guide he had were the General Orders, which tell him what not to do instead of what he has to do."

Not surprisingly, Dr Mahathir has little attachment to his workplace or his official home. "The only thing I did when I first came in was to inherit Tun Hussein Onn's desk, and I think it's still in the old office."

He says his pre-occupation with ruling the country has forced him to give up wood- and metal-working as a pastime, something he enjoyed in the early years of his premiership.

"Once I tried to melt some metal. I tried to light the gas, and it exploded in my face.

"I didn't tell anybody," he grins.

"But these days I have no time," he says, a little wistfully.

Dr Mahathir has his foibles too. According to his aides, he hates having his hair cut and nails manicured.

"He hates it because he has nothing to do while he sits there," says Sufi Yusoff, Assistant Press Secretary to the Prime Minister.

The professed rationalist is also not as organised as he wants to be. "I don't retain papers that I write. Some get lost. I didn't think people will be that interested."

And he does not trust his memory. He says he has jotted down observations and thoughts in "hundreds" of little notebooks that he takes everywhere. "Don't trust your memory. You will forget."

While his mind may usually rule his heart, he has been shown to be far from an emotionless man. Like Holmes, he can be roused to anger when others fail to perceive what he sees so clearly.

"Oh, I have a lot of regrets. There are things that I find I'm unable to accomplish, mainly those that I fail to convince others that it is the right thing to do.

"It frustrates me because I know, and I think they know, what is the right thing to do but they just refuse to do it.

"Like my problem with trying to change the Malay character, to embrace a value system that can ensure them success, but they consistently refuse to do it."

He worries about the capacity of Malays to absorb knowledge, and their propensity to retreat into religion.

"Don't complain later on when you find the other communities way ahead of us and we are far behind. It is our choice. We have provided the means, you refuse, you object."

Then for a split second, he looks moved when asked about the four men who have served as Deputy Prime Minister - Datuk Musa Hitam (now Tan Sri), Encik Ghafar Baba (now Tun), Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Datuk Seri Abdullah Admad Badawi.

"Well, you know I lost my first deputy because he didn't agree with me. My second was lost because someone had an ambition to take his place.

"Then I have my third deputy who I was all prepared to hand over to in 1998. Unfortunately, as you know, we had an economic crisis. I found my deputy was unable to handle the (job) so I stayed on.

He shrugs and continues: "But I think up to now, Pak Lah is doing fine."