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Canadian's tribute to PM in book form

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The foreign media is not usually known to be kind to Malaysia, least of all to its Prime Minister, but Michael Bociurkiw - a well-known Canadian journalist - is steadfast in his aim to pay tribute to "Malaysia's visionary" Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the way he knows best - in a book.

The brilliantly-illustrated coffee-table book called "Mahathir: 22 Years, 22 Voices" will be launched in Kuala Lumpur on Oct 10.

Bociurkiw, a freelance journalist who writes for, among others, Forbes magazine, MSNBC.com and Asia Times, was based in Asia for many years, including Malaysia, and is, therefore no stranger to the Malaysian political, social and economic scene.

In an interview here recently, Bociurkiw described the book as an "inspirational, candid, behind-the-scenes" look at Dr Mahathir "as a politician growing into the role of Prime Minister".

Bociurkiw, who is the editor of the nine-chapter book, said it is called "22 Voices" because it contains tributes to Dr Mahathir from 22 "people who know him well" including world leaders, corporate giants, members of the academia and other renowned personalities.

They include the Prime Minister's wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Cabinet Ministers and prominent Malaysian personalities, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

The foreword is penned by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Bociurkiw said Dr Siti Hasmah gave a poignant insight of Dr Mahathir as a husband, father and grandfather.

"My favourite quote is from International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz who related how Dr Mahathir once helped her carry her luggage when she had difficulty with it."

Bociurkiw secured an exclusive interview with Dr Mahathir for inclusion in the book, which is published by Melewar Apex Sdn Bhd and JF Publishing Sdn Bhd.

"I had interviewed him three times. During the recent interview for the book which I went with Tunku Abdullah of the Melewar Group - a great fan of the Prime Minister - Dr Mahathir was relaxed and candid, even laughed at some of my jokes.

"He touched on Malaysian drivers, what he found most challenging as Prime Minister, and how he maintains his energy level."

Bociurkiw said what was also unique about the book was that it would feature "some never before seen" photographs of Dr Mahathir from private collections.

"We are letting the photos do the talking. My team of six and I took several months to source for photos from wire agencies, local newspapers and private collections. I spent nine months in all to research, put the book together, captioning the photos, and I was in Malaysia throughout that period."

The book also has an advisory board, of which the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad is a member.

Bociurkiw said coming up with the book has been a good experience. He expressed admiration for Dr Mahathir for always being unafraid to speak his mind.

"It takes a very bold man to tell the International Monetary Fund off. I

have interviewed many Asian leaders and I have got a good perspective. Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew is very curious about the Prime Minister and I sense a kind of respect between the two.

"Dr Mahathir is also a very humble man. He was taken aback when told of the book and said he would be too embarrassed to attend the launch.

"So, we taped his greetings and this will be aired during the launch. He also agreed to autograph 10 copies of the book, which will be auctioned."

He said Dr Mahathir was not ruffled by whatever questions thrown his way.

Bociurkiw thanked his Malaysian contacts for their help. They guided him as well as assisted in securing interviews and obtaining photographs.

An initial 10,000 to 15,000 copies of the book, to be sold at RM188 each, will be printed.

Among the book's sponsors are YTL, Malaysian Mining Corporation, Southern Bank Berhad, Renaissance Hotel and Alliance Bank.