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Che Det: Service over self

SIMPLY Tok Det in Nuance reveals an ordinary man with extraordinary qualities of head and heart. Many of us find it hard to look at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as an ordinary man. But that's what he is: An ordinariness all the more reinforced by his simplicity. He is a good husband, father and granddad and is loyal to his friends, as they are to him.

We know Dr Mahathir is not afraid to get his hands dirty, toying with wood-and-metal works. He does the foxtrot and the ronggeng. He hates the time wasted in having his hair cut and nails manicured. He enjoys a 15-minute siesta and like many of us, he gets by with a decent six hours of sleep. His grandchildren call him Tok Det and Kedahans call him Che Det. And he does not always agree with the views expressed in the NST's editorials nor, contrary to popular belief, does he dictate our editorial decisions.

Despite the fact that he has a retentive memory, Dr Mahathir keeps notes for fear that his memory would fail him. His ready acceptance of people for what they are, as elicited from the fact that some of his staff have been with him for 17 years and longer, reveals a trusting nature. Too trusting, some might complain. In reality, Dr Mahathir is easy to approach and even the lowliest feel at home in his presence. He exudes humility and carries a benign smile that would disarm his opponents and soothe the ruffled feelings of his critics. Like any other mortal, he has his regrets and weaknesses too. These are the things he felt he has not accomplished, mainly his efforts to change the Malay mindset and character.

Such personal glimpses make Dr Mahathir all the more endearing. Above all, he is a man guided by rationality. Very few politicians could reconcile political wisdom with moral judgment and moral courage. But Dr Mahathir could undertake such a conciliation simply because he regards political power as service above self. Above all, he is a realist who responds to changing situations, not a doctrinaire ideologue who follows textbooks.