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Dr M's trend-setting suits locally made

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - If "clothes maketh the man", Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a true testament to the expression.

Always immaculate and impeccable in his well-cut suits, batik or baju melayu, many including former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher have asked him which international designer he goes to, only to be left amazed when he turns over his coat flap to reveal a local brand-name, "Lord's Tailor".

Making public appearances in his capacity as the country's Prime Minister, respected the world over, Dr Mahathir, like a true statesman, has always made sure he dressed well for the occasion.

For this, he owes it to the husband and wife team of Robert Loh, 58, and Liew Lee Lee, 50.

Having been his trusted wardrobe designers for the past 16 years, the duo recall when they were initially given the honour.

"His aide-de-camp came to our outlet and told us Dr Mahathir would like us to make some suits for him after taking a liking to one worn by a member of his family.

"It was nerve-racking that day when we went over to the Prime Minister's Department. With a suitcase of tailoring tools, his many bodyguards really scrutinised and watched us like hawks after seeing its contents.

"When we actually met the Prime Minister, who is very gentle and soft-spoken, we were put at ease," Loh said.

The first impression he had of Dr Mahathir, who was 61 then, is one that lasts until today.

"This is one man who really knows what he wants.

"Within half an hour, I already knew what he likes and doesn't, his colour preferences and the cutting he fancies.

"For him, his suits have to be slim-waisted with well-padded shoulders, preferably - 'Super 100 all-wool' ones."

He started tailoring single-breasted suits with three buttons as preferred by Dr Mahathir.

It wasn't long before Dr Mahathir was hooked on double-breasted six-buttoned suits, a style he maintained for over a decade.

However, his mostly blue, black, grey and camel beige suits went through another revamp. This established him as a trend-setter and created a strong following, even though he did not realise it.

It all started with a gift given to him by the couple on his last birthday. Dr Mahathir fell in love with the suit paired with a high-collared white shirt with a single silver button and has since made 10 pairs.

Making its first official appearance during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit earlier this year, the charcoal-black Nehru-collared suit attracted much admiration.

Orders came pouring in for the Lohs after that with customers showing newspaper cuttings of Dr Mahathir in the suit.

One thing that amazes the Lohs is how a man with such huge responsibilities could maintain his figure for 15 years.

"Never has it fluctuated. Every time I take his measurement it is always 39-34-41 inches.

"Even when I thought I saw 'it' coming and suggested that his suits be made one inch looser, he declined, confident that it was not a problem and

that he would regain his ideal waistline ... and he did."

However, Loh said, the last time he measured Dr Mahathir, some two months ago, he actually gained an inch.

"It was something new to us, he must be really happy with his retirement plans."

The Prime Minister he added, is far from extravagant, he still visits the Lohs to have his suits altered and to replace loose buttons.

"Every now and then, I still see him in pairs I tailored six years ago."

The Prime Minister, he said, is a man who practised what he preached like his call for the people to support local products.

"For him, his batik shirts have to be Malaysian batik or it's no batik at all."

The Prime Minister's wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali too, is a fan of Lord's creations, having made several Nehru-collared suits that matched her husband's.

Honoured that the first couple have always been happy with their work, they were even more pleased after having visited their walk-in closet in Sri Perdana.

"Some 80 per cent of the clothes were our creations."

The relationship between the two couples is now more than just that between the tailor and customer. They are now friends.

"We are honoured and privileged Datuk Seri chose us as his tailors. He dishes out really good advice too. Once I really felt age catching up with me. Dr Mahathir is years older but looks much more energetic, so I asked him for his secret.

"His answer was simple, he pointed to his head and said - 'It is all up here, if you have that will-power, you can do anything'.

"Now I see why he can be at so many places in one day and still look fine," said Loh who built his portfolio of clients when he was in his 20s with the first famous customer being boxer Muhammad Ali who came to Kuala Lumpur for a boxing match with Joe Bugner in 1972.

The Lohs are optimistic they would be able to continue serving their most valued customer even when he no longer leads the country. After all, this is a man who takes pride in looking good.

With a clientele of over 10,000 now, the stylish couple operates outlets in Ampang Walk and Bangsar Shopping Centre (BSC), here.