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He's simply Tok Det to 15 grandchildren

Fauziah Ismail; Lee Siew Lian; Fazli Ibrahim

TO his grandchildren, he is simply "Tok Det". The Prime Minister is Granddad Mahathir - not the man who dumbfounded the country when he announced he wanted to retire.

"I think most of them didn't quite understand what was happening," says Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"They have never looked at me as the Prime Minister, only as their grandfather."

His seven children - Marina, Mirzan, Melinda, Mokhzani, Mukhriz, Mazhar and Maizura - call him "Daddy".

"I was married during British times. It was fashionable then to use English terms, daddy and mummy and things like that, so it got stuck," he says.

Dr Mahathir doesn't think any of his children and grandchildren take after him. "In terms of politics, none is interested. Even in terms of my profession, I can't get my children or grandchildren to take up medicine. They go their own way."

His relationship with his family is very different from his own with his father.

"I am very close to my children. They talk to me and I talk to them.

"I was afraid of my father. He was a strict man. I was never very close to him except in later years when he was very old and we discussed politics.

"Before that, there was a distance between us but not out of fear. In those days, respect for parents was a strong element.

"My father was one of those rare birds who actually ran away from home to go to school. In those days, Muslims didn't like their children to go to school, which were run by Christian brothers. But he wanted to study, so he went to school on his own. As a result, he was well educated for a Muslim in those days."

Dr Mahathir, who just turned 77, does not show his age at all.

He laughs when told that many have wondered what his secret is.

"It is made up of a lot of little things. If there is one, it is moderation in whatever I do. I don't overeat. I don't overstrain myself. No excesses."

The doctor also prescribes six hours of sleep a night.

"When I travel, people ask me how I can start work immediately upon arrival. I tell them I sleep on the plane.

"In fact, I can get to sleep longer on the plane than on the ground as nobody disturbs me. In 12 hours of flying, I will sleep for 10."

He goes to bed between midnight and 1 am. Party matters keep him awake sometimes, he says, "but I must admit I am able to sleep quite easily. I very seldom keep awake at night."

Dr Mahathir also catnaps, taking a 15-minute break during the day. "I don't lie down. I just close my eyes and go off for 15 minutes. Then I am back."

He listens to oldies, the evergreens of the 1950s and 1960s; the songs he listened to when he was in university. "Those were real songs, not just 'hey, hey, hey'. Nowadays you don't sing but say, 'baby, baby, baby'. There's no meaning in it."

And he dances. He likes those he did in university, especially the foxtrot. "We had university functions and everybody danced. That was the

norm in those days.

"Sometimes I ronggeng. Once in a while at some private functions, they ask me to dance the ronggeng."

He still rides horses, a favourite pastime of his, although he has given up the wood- and metal-work that he enjoyed before.

He does not watch the evening news anymore, as he is required to attend functions at night or catch up with work.

"I can't do any work in the office because that's when I spend my time dealing with people."

Ironically, the man who pushed Malaysia to computerise rarely uses the machines himself, and has left checking his e-mails to his assistants.

"People write to me but I can't spend time looking through it. Sometimes, my staff will give me the hard copy. I am reasonably capable of using the computer, (but) I have no time."

Nor does the trend-spotting "PM" send text messages over the cellular phone.

"My wife does that. She doesn't talk to me anymore. In the car when we should be busy talking to each other, she would be busy SMS-ing the children. She doesn't hear what I say or see the scenery outside the car."

Smiling, he mimics Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali thumbing her mobile phone.

Still, he finds time to read the New Straits Times in the mornings, and as well as Utusan Malaysia. "Somehow, I try," he smiles, amid laughter from the 12 journalists present.

Retirement or not, Dr Mahathir is unlikely to take up what many retirees do - golf.

"It takes too much time. I can't stand four hours walking around seemingly exercising.

"In those days, you carried your own golf bag and walked. That is exercising. Today, you go on a golf buggy. Yes, you get a kick out of hitting a ball out there. So, I told golfers, if you get a kick out of hitting a ball, why don't you buy one hundred balls and kick them."

He has yet to say what he intends to do once he starts drawing his pension; his answers appear intentionally vague - no super-think tank, maybe some party activities, a little writing.

He says he wants to rest a little, and only then decide what to do. "Although I plan things, largely I respond to situations."

He doesn't see himself retiring overseas. "A lifetime, no. I would like to spend a few days on holiday but everytime I am out of the country, I want to come back. I feel much more comfortable at home."

And home, for now, seems to be Kuala Lumpur.

"I will stay in KL, I think. I can't go back to Alor Setar - most of my friends are no longer around. Of course I love Kedah. That was where I was born and brought up. But when I go back there, sometimes I feel like a stranger. Most of the people I know are here."

What is likely to keep Dr Mahathir company are his books. An avid reader, he likes history books and indulges in whodunnits, such as those about Sherlock Holmes. But he is quite keen on international espionage and intrigue.

"I bought Sherlock Holmes and the rest of the detective stories and there are some favourite authors whom I never miss such as Wilbur Smith and Ken Follett."

Between now and October, when he intends to leave office, there is going to be little time for himself and his family. Dr Mahathir says his last 10 months as head of government are shaping up as his busiest.

"People seem to want to pack in everything they can before I retire. I went to one state where they had five functions in the afternoon and five

functions at night."

Dr Mahathir seems a touch sensitive when asked about his birthday on Dec 20.

"I don't celebrate birthdays. I tried to hide my birth date as much as possible. I don't tell people.

"Sometimes, I go out of the country on my birthdays but this time, I cannot go out. People plan birthday celebrations (for me). It is embarrassing... a public occasion was hijacked to celebrate my birthday. They prepared the pulut kuning and all that. I think one should have a low-key birthday celebration once you are old. Birthdays remind you that you are old."

His birthday wish?

"For this country to continue to be peaceful and prosperous."