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Thanks Dr Mahathir, for showing us the way

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IT will be a very emotional day today for Malaysians. Many, including journalists, will not be able to control their emotions as they bid Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad farewell and wish him well.

Many of us have grown up with him as journalists. Starting as junior reporters some have moved up the ladder to hold senior positions while others have moved on to other professions. We have all benefited from his guidance and tutorials.

Covering Dr Mahathir was a never-ending learning process. The education was invaluable and the syllabus not available in any school or university not even in the Ivy League universities.

One learnt as much as one wanted. The only condition was that one had to keep one's eyes and mind open. Among others, he exposed us to real life, the intricacies of the political world and workings of the global marketplace.

Covering Dr Mahathir has been a very rewarding experience for me. He is instrumental in instilling self-confidence and a sense of greater pride in being a Malaysian.

Unlike some leaders who would scold, berate and ridicule journalists for questions they did not like, Dr Mahathir answered every question, no matter how trivial it may seem. He is not one who will praise you for your work. But he would on occasion say, "I read your piece" or "Keep on writing". That was enough to encourage me to try and do better and improve myself as a journalist.

He is caring and shows great concern for the welfare of individuals, visiting them in hospitals and making time, from his busy schedule, for their special day. On a personal note, Dr Mahathir and indeed Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali's concern for my welfare is something that I will never forget.

My passport, credit card, travellers' cheques and airline ticket were stolen while on assignment in Copenhagen. Finding out about the loss, Dr Mahathir took a personal interest, which prompted the officials to work harder to get me my papers to enable me to complete my assignment. Thanks to the Prime Minister's concern I had my temporary travel document within a day. Before this, I was told that it would take days.

Dr Siti Hasmah's concern was equally touching. She wanted to know how I was going to cope without funds and asked whether I needed money. She offered to assist.

Following Dr Mahathir at home and around the world offered insights into developments, situations and a peek into the economic, political and social aspects at different levels - of national, bilateral, regional and international relations - that otherwise would remain unknown to me.

His drive, zest and conviction is unmatched. This means that those of us assigned to cover him had to try hard to keep up with him. It was not always easy. There were times when we would be exhausted and ready to drop but he would still be going strong.

Once after a trip that took us from Africa to Europe, from Washington DC on the East Coast to the West Coast, and across to Japan and China, the journalists were exhausted. But he was still going strong and full of energy even on the last leg of the trip in China.

When asked how he managed to keep his energy level high despite the long trip, his answer: "It is all in the mind. If you think you are tired then

you will feel tired."

He always arrived at his destination ready and raring to go. He would also work on board the plane.

With a full travel schedule, which included transfers and flight changes, it was suggested to Dr Mahathir that perhaps the Government should consider buying an aircraft, similar to Air Force One, for the Prime Minister's travels. This, we argued, would make it easier for him and journalists could travel on the same plane with him. His answer: "No. What would people say?"

His pace never slowed not even after he announced that he would be stepping down. It was even more hectic and more so in the last few months. It was quite a task trying to keep up with him.

Local travel and visits to states and remote areas by air and road were not an easy ride. During election campaigns, the pace was hectic. Sleep on the plane, get to a destination, campaign, get on a helicopter, head for another destination, campaign, and move on to another. This non-stop schedule was kept up for the entire campaign period and on his state visits.

Despite his tight schedule, he always had time for us. There was no such thing as "no time" or "too busy". But he gave us as much time as we wanted and answered all the questions patiently and at length, even if he had answered the question many times before.

We are the envy of many of our fellow journalists from abroad. We had a leader who was accessible and provided us with timely briefings that as journalists we needed to meet our deadlines.

Dr Mahathir made us proud to be Malaysians. Made us stand tall, run faster, jump higher, strive harder and fly the flag higher. Malaysians now sing the national anthem spontaneously and with pride even when overseas.

Today, we know the reason. We are better off. We stand tall with our heads held high. He has put the country on the world map.

As a result, today most people know where Malaysia is. This was not the case even in the mid-1980s. The elite White House journalists, for example, had a hard time - when Dr Mahathir on an official visit in 1984 met US President Ronald Reagan in the White House - to locate where Malaysia was. They knew little about the country or its economy and people.

Today, the White House Press not only know where Malaysia is, but they certainly know who Dr Mahathir is.

The economic machinery has been "well oiled" by Dr Mahathir's hard work and the momentum set for it to move forward and upward. He has set out a vision for the nation and a better future for its people.

Perhaps one of the best presents we can give Dr Mahathir is to ensure that we continue to work hard, that the economy stays on course towards his vision, keep the Malaysian flag flying high and make the country even better known and respected on the world stage.

We have achieved a standard of living that is the envy of many. We have attained respect of the world community.

We did it our way. But sir (Dr Mahathir) you showed us the way. Thank you.