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The man behind the leader

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IT is a story about a man we all know - or think we know. A man of vision, strength and stature. To Malaysians, he is the man who propelled the nation to towering heights. To the younger generation, he is the only Prime Minister they have ever known. To the foreign Press, he is a controversial leader with no qualms about speaking his mind. To his parents and siblings, he is Che Det, the most doted on of nine children. To his children, he is Daddy, and to his grandchildren, Tok Det.

For six weeks beginning tomorrow, Malaysians can catch a "below-the-surface" glimpse of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, our longest-serving Prime Minister, in an entertaining historical documentary on TV3.

The series, simply titled Mahathir, chronicles the life of the Prime Minister from the day he was born - Friday, Dec 20, 1925.

The documentary is an extraordinary offering, with re-enactments of his birth and the important events of his early adulthood. Each half-hour episode (the final is an hour-long) delves into the personality behind the public persona, sprinkled with anecdotes from his family, close friends, contemporaries and even his staff. Included is footage of historical events and the trials, tribulations and challenges he has faced as Prime Minister and president of Umno the past 22 years.

"Everyone we interviewed is above 60 - those who could give first-hand accounts of their experiences with the Prime Minister," said executive producer Sa'adullah Che Noor. "We wanted comments from those who were closest to him, but the sad fact is that many of them are no longer around."

Some of those interviewed were Dr Mahathir's sisters (Habsah and Rafeah); Tun Syed Ahmad Syed Mahmud Shahabudin, the Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Malacca and a relative (he lived in Dr Mahathir's house as a little boy); and Datuk Paduka Shaari Daud, a former Kedah State Secretary and childhood friend.

The programme will also feature interviews with his former deputies, Tun Ghafar Baba and Tan Sri Musa Hitam, as well as present Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim. Rais should have interesting stories to tell, having once left Umno to join Parti Semangat 46.

When the idea of paying tribute to the Prime Minister was mooted in July last year by TV3's former executive director Abdul Rahman Ahmad, the concept of the presentation boggled the producer's mind. After all, much has been said about the Prime Minister. What could possibly be new?

"We told him that we wanted to document his life on film. He replied quickly and said that we were free to interview anybody we wanted - his family, friends and foes. So we did, although some declined."

Modelled on the BBC documentary Thatcher: The Downing Street Years, Mahathir is an attempt to tell a story of a leader, though "not quite the ordinary way."

Made for Malaysians young and old, Sa'adullah said that each episode is like a movie with "a crisis, a climax and a resolution." For example, the third episode deals with Dr Mahathir's expulsion from Umno after a misunderstanding with the late Tengku Abdul Rahman in 1969, his return to the party in 1972, and then his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister in 1976.

Students will find the documentary an entertaining and effective way to learn history.

"Watching something on television is a pleasant way of learning. Reading, of course, gives you more. But watching an informative programme speeds up the learning process."

The audio-visual impact of the six-part series will no doubt give the documentary a cutting edge. It combines in-depth research by Dr Ramlah Adam of the History Department at the University of Malaya. It also includes props from the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia, priceless film footage from Filem Negara Malaysia, and rarely seen pictures from the National Archives, also music by Ramli MS.

Filming Mahathir involved some 70 budding actors and actresses, two associate producers and a 14-strong technical production team.

On the lighter side, viewers can look forward to hearing the Prime Minister's sisters reminisce about the day Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali was introduced to the family by their youngest brother. Also they can hear stories from Dr Mahathir's coursemates who attended the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore.

The production, which began in March, "is a very sequential account of his development - the Prime Minister doesn't actually appear in the programme until the last few episodes," said Sa'adullah.

"But at the end of it, we hope that viewers will see that the Prime Minister is just an ordinary human being, who was destined to be a leader of his country. He had incredible foresight, even as a young boy, and he succeeds by approaching problems methodically, with an open and scientific mind, that for each problem, there is a solution."

* `Mahathir' airs every Sunday at 9pm over TV3 from tomorrow until Nov 2.

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