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The prince and the prime minister

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NO expense has been spared. No effort has been deemed too great, no time considered too lengthy.

Mahathir: 22 Years, 22 Voices, to be launched by the Deputy Prime Minister tomorrow, has been a year in the making. And the coffee-table book was prompted by an acquaintance that is much more than passing.

"Because of my long friendship with Dr Mahathir," says Tan Sri Tunku Abdullah Tuanku Abdul Rahman, "I wanted to do this book with these two young ladies."

Though the idea "came from all three of us", the brother of Negri Sembilan's ruler is quick to credit the "two young ladies", his daughter Tunku Soraya Dakhiah and her friend and business partner Joan Foo Mahony.

"My daughter and Joan began it," he says, "and I thought, 'What a good idea!'"

"From the beginning, the idea was to get 22 'voices' (because of Dr Mahathir's 22 years in office) of world leaders and senior statesmen who'd come into contact with our prime minister during his long career, to write about their experience of him.

"Dr Mahathir's been a friend since 1964," says Tunku Abdullah. "We entered Parliament together, we visited the US together during Confrontation with Indonesia.

"We went in a big youth group. He wasn't in the Malaysian Youth Council, but he'd just entered politics. We wanted to rebut what the Indonesians would claim at the World Assembly of Youth in Massachusetts.

"There were about 20 of us, and about 20 of them. In fact, they didn't do much of anything, so we ended up having a good time! It was our first time in the US. We got to know each other there.

"He was interested in business. He thought I'd be the politician, he the businessman. Somehow, we got our wires crossed! Cut costs, he'd say. A real businessman! Even now, he keeps telling Malaysians, 'Cut costs - it's the way to make money.'"

For all Dr Mahathir's cost-cutting advice, though, he was no penny-pincher.

"He's a kind person; as a doctor in private practice in Alor Star, he gave out free medicines and consultation. And he said he made money! He drove a Pontiac, and so on! So he gave to the people.

"By doing so, you make some more. That's why he's successful."

Dr Mahathir, remembers Tunku Abdullah, was not one to push himself forward.

"He wasn't a livewire, by any means. His wife, in fact, asked me to give him a nudge. He was so shy!

"At parties, he'd sit alone and wait, thinking people might come to him. They didn't, though - no one knew him! So I had to bring people over and introduce them; he was painfully shy.

"In the end, people did come to him. He talks good sense."

In 1964, Tunku Abdullah stood for federal elections in Rawang, Selangor.

"There wasn't anywhere else," he recalls. "Umno held it all.

"When I was a civil servant, I'd been district officer in Rawang. The Opposition held it when I stood for election there, but I knew the voters, so I defeated the incumbent.

"No Malay dared stand in a Chinese area, against a Socialist Front fellow! Dr Mahathir still tells everyone, 'Do it like Tunku Abdullah. Go

to the field, visit people, talk to them.' Rather than going on about Umno and Barisan Nasional.

"So I was MP for Rawang, and Dr Mahathir for Kota Star. It was the first time either of us had been MP. I was 39.

"We like each other. When he came to Parliament, he'd stay in a tiny apartment he shared with current Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat Tun Mohd Zahir Ismail and another person. I said, 'What on earth is this? You're an MP; this isn't fitting - stay with me instead.

"From then on, whenever he was in Kuala Lumpur, he'd stay at my house. First, it was a small, rented apartment on Jalan P. Ramlee. Then, I bought a house in Kenny Hill when Soraya was born - number 11, on what's now Jalan Tunku Putra.

"If Parliament met for two weeks, he'd stay for two. But it didn't meet so often then, nor was it in session very long. Party control was great, opposition few and far between, so we'd see him, on average, once in two months for a week or so.

"Dr Mahathir stayed with me through the apartment, Number 11 and Petaling Jaya; we moved there after selling Number 11. After that, he became a big shot and was provided with a house!"

Though that apartment on Jalan P. Ramlee's now dilapidated, says Tunku Abdullah, and "the gate's falling off its hinges", the friendship between the two men has stood fast.

"Even when he was kicked out by (first prime minister) Tengku Abdul Rahman, he stayed with me. I didn't care if this put Tengku Abdul Rahman's nose out of joint. It must've, but my relationship with him was alright. He got me into Parliament, after all! He agreed that I should run in Rawang.

"Dr Mahathir had nowhere to speak, so he travelled a distance from Kuala Lumpur. I said, 'Why're you speaking way over there?' And he told me no one else would invite him anywhere else!"

The Prime Minister hasn't been short of invitations for years. But traces of the shy Dr Mahathir of yore remain.

"We asked him to launch this book, and he said, 'I couldn't launch a book about myself! Ask Pak Lah' ...

"So we did."

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