

Mahathir

QUOTE

That letter to the Tengku: "I still don't know how it got circulated. I only know that what Kissinger says is true. No official secret is a secret with the arrival of the Xerox machine. The only secret is the unwritten one."

PERSONALITY PROFILE

By Leung Thong Ping

Always better off than his friends. In primary school he ran a tikam, during the Japanese occupation he ran a market stall selling bananas, fresh and fried

ALOR STAR: It is difficult to reconcile Dr. Mahathir's gentle demeanour with his controversial speeches. There is a certain lassitude about him reinforced by a paunch one seldom suspects from the half-length photographs of him.

He thinks this is a surprise he springs on many. "I know what people think." He laughed, folded his arms and sank deeper into the mustard-coloured armchair.

"People label me an ultra. Even my friends call me that. But I don't think that's fair at all. I've never been excessive in my statements. Most of what I have said, the moderates now accept.

"What I ask to be done for the Malays does not exceed what was agreed at independence. I don't talk of special privileges. Rather, it's special position — like what the United States has provided for the Red Indians.

"Being backward is not a privilege. And having things provided so you can get out of this backwardness is not a privilege.

Fashionable man

"Do I get much hate mail? Come to think of it, the only unfriendly letter I've received is quite mild. Somebody wrote to say I shouldn't return to Umno but join PMIP instead.

"But fan mail I've got a lot. At one time I received 30 to 50 a month. Now they are down to two or three."

He squinted behind his black-rimmed reading glasses. "It's the sun," he said, glancing at the tinted French windows he had slid open when we came in.

"I have weak eyes. That's why I'm always photographed in dark glasses." He put them on.

Sun-glasses flatter Dr. Mahathir. They sit well with his elegant sideburns, for he is also a fashionable man.

He likes gay shirts and drives to work in a white Ford Fairmont wearing a beige bush-jacket instead of the conventional white Kildare over-alls. "I keep up-to-date."

UPH For a slum child born and bred in Seberang ~~Prai~~, Dr. Mahathir has done very well for himself.

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No, he never thought of joining the PMIP when he was expelled, even though "in certain ways, the Umno has nearly the same aims as the PMIP."

"My only difference with the PMIP is that I never believed that the way they worked will achieve their aims. Isolated from the Government, it will be able to cry out, but as to achievement, there will be none."

So what would he have done if he had not returned to Umno?

"The chances are that I will be very independent in my views, and if people will listen to me, I'll talk, if people won't listen to me, then I'll keep quiet."

Certainly a lot of people are listening and watching. His climb from respectability to prominence has been achieved with dramatic ease.

In March last year, he was re-admitted to Umno. Three months later he contested the Umno Supreme Council election and was returned with the highest number of votes.

In August he was appointed a member of the newly - formed Higher Education Advisory Council; in November Tun Razak appointed him chairman of Fima (Food Industries of Malaysia); come December and the Kedah Legislative Assembly elected him to the Dewan Negara.

Different

"I think if you look at the attitude of PAS in the past, you could never have imagined that they would ever enter into any close relationship with the Alliance.

"Their ideas on how to do things in this country are completely different from those of the Umno or the Alliance. For example, they have always maintained that they will not work with other races in this country.

"But now there is this view that it is important to accept what is already a fact, that other races are here, and whether you like it or not, they have political as well as economic power. So it is far better to find ways and means to work out how to achieve the aims of PAS through working with others.

"This change of attitude is radical for them, something that is so radical that a big proportion of their followers have not been able to accept it yet.

"That is why the result in the recent Kuala Kedah by-election showed such a big vote for the Independent candidate..."

Could this have been because Datuk Asri and the other PAS leaders did not make it a point to campaign for Datuk Senu?

"I would be sorry to see Asri's advice rejected by his own followers before he has had time to really explain what is meant by coalition.

"If he is rejected now, the damage done I think would be permanent for him."

Large vote

Coming back to the large vote Cik Siti Nor obtained at Kuala Kedah. Was this because few people understood the coalition arrangements and voted for her as a result, or was it in fact an expression of dissatisfaction over the government's policies?

"Many factors were responsible for the Independent candidate's large number of votes. One of the most important is the fact that among PAS members, the majority who are against the coalition come from Kedah.

"In Kedah, there is a feeling among PAS members that the party is growing in strength — a misreading of the situation, in my opinion—and the need for a coalition is not there.

Coalitions

Dr. Mahathir's return to the political limelight has coincided with the growth of coalition politics in this country. How does he view the attempt to forge a National Front?

"This is a strange thing perhaps for a politician to say, but I think politics should be downgraded in this country.

"Concentration should be in the field of development, on economic well-being rather than on politics, because whether we like it or not, politics tends to divide, and this country can accept only a certain degree of division.

"I would rather see people come together and sincerely work out plans so that everybody will have a fair share in all the good things available here.

"So if people can forget a bit of their party politics and concentrate on this, I think we would achieve more and would create greater stability in this country."

He agrees that the PAS-Alliance coalition is probably the most significant development in Malaysian party politics since Merdeka.

"My feeling is that they are not quite sure that they can convince their own followers. And I think rather than risk being rejected by their own followers, they would rather not put themselves to the test."

I pointed out that Datuk Asri has tried to explain his stand by saying that theirs is an inter-governmental coalition, not a coalition at party level, and hence, there is no obligation on his part to campaign for the Alliance candidate. Do you agree with this view? I asked.

Agreement

"Well, you can't draw a sharp line on this sort of thing. Basically it is an inter-governmental coalition, but then there was an agreement that if there is a by-election, then my party will not stand where your party has won.

"That is not governmental. It is an agreement between two political parties. But how far will they be involved?"

"Just now I think the PAS leaders are feeling their way about because they know quite well that large sections of their own followers do not appreciate the coalition.

"Because of that they are not willing to put themselves to the test, and I think they are quite right in making that decision.

Animosity

"There are other factors. Umno has to explain to the predominantly rural constituency what the government is doing for the people Of course there are some people who have not benefited from these projects and these people tend to lean towards the independent candidate.

"The other factor is the internal politics between PAS and Umno. The animosity between PAS and Umno members is not political as much as just plain dislike for the other chap.

"For example, in a village if somebody joins Umno, the person who doesn't like him would

join PAS not because he likes PAS but mainly because he wants to be in a party different from that of the man he doesn't like.

"So the principle motive behind joining a party is not so much politics as personal dislike. And because of that they do not want to come together again just because the parties have come together.

"All they are doing is to utilise the party strength to back their own grievances against another chap."

Now that the coalition is a fact, I asked Dr. Mahathir how he thought the rank and file of PAS and Umno are going to

reconcile themselves to each other?

"This is the sort of thing that has to percolate from the top. It will be a case of the top leadership convincing the lower rungs of the leadership, and then slowly perhaps it might get down to the bottom."

But Dr. Mahathir was obviously convinced that this is not going to be an easy task.

"I have tried to bring members of the two parties together but I have invariably failed. I doubt very much whether in a single village the people who are in the warring factions will ever come together."

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Besides, Mahathir prefers it this way. One politician in the house is enough.

"Our first separations were hard to bear. The Budget session took him away for months and we saw him only on weekends. But you learn to live with it after a while."

He compensated by often bringing home the family's favourite super-market foods like Swiss fondue and corn flakes. He insisted on her joining him for holidays abroad.

They went twice round the world, thrice to Japan and Hong Kong. They holidayed in London and saw Maria and Musa Hitam. Inche Musa was then reading for his Master's at Sussex University.

"We were so homesick for curry and Maria cooks such delicious ones. We were always eating dinner there. I don't cook often myself. Work keeps me so busy."

President

Dr. Hasmah, who drives to work in a green Colt Galant, heads the Rural Health Training Centre in Jitra, six miles north of Alor Star.

She is also chairman of the Kedah Family Planning Association, regional vice-chairman for the Muslim Women's Welfare Organisation and vice-president of the Kedah Anti-TB Association.

Dr. Mahathir is the association's president. He has been for the last 15 years.

A typical day in the Mahathir home begins at six. Dr. Hasmah sees the children off to school in their chauffeur-driven white Opel van. By 7.15 Dr. Mahathir will be up doing his jerks.

"He's always trying to get us to join him," says Dr. Hasmah laughing. "The children don't but I do sometimes."

They eat breakfast together. He likes his bread with curry or he has nasi lemak. He doesn't eat eggs though the children love them.

Considerate

She leaves for work at eight and he leaves about nine. They lunch together except on Saturdays when he is busiest at the clinic. Dinner is after six for he seldom comes home earlier than that.

"It's the best meal of the day," says Dr. Hasmah, glancing at the gleeful children still seated attentively round her.

"Everybody loves food in this house. We often have sukiyaki, roast chicken or Swiss fondue. Mahathir and I first ate that in Geneva and it was delicious." The door opened softly.

She looked up and smiled at her husband who had just come home. He was wearing a songkok, a white cotton baju and green checked sarong. She rose to offer him her seat. They are very considerate of each other.

Gadgets

He reprimanded the children for rushing for the settee when we began taking pictures of the family. "Let mother sit first." He looked approvingly at the seating arrangement before sitting down himself.

We had lunch in the raised dining room, which is wall-papered with a scene from Sorrento. Food was served up from the basement kitchen through a hatch fitted with a pulley.

There is an electric heater and a cleverly concealed wash-basin on the side-board. Dr. Mahathir is very fond of novelties. His house is full of gadgets and surprises.

"They are all brainwaves of his. He has the last say on the furnishings," says Dr. Hasmah. Dr. Mahathir patted his broad chest in jest.

He showed me the leather-bound bar that disappears behind a sliding panel. "But I can't hide it any more."

"Everybody in the kampong knows it's there." He laughed and pushed the panel back again.

Boat-man

He pointed to the three-tiered table that can be separated to make a long conference table for the lounge. "My idea too."

When not in use, the table decorates the corner of the family living room where there is a piano, a TV set and a screen for projecting slides.

For Dr. Mahathir is a photographer too. He showed me an album of colour shots he had taken.

There were 12 glowing prints that captured the mutation of a senna tree through the year. The majestic tree can be seen from his study.

He showed me the elegant black wrought-iron candelabra and the six-bulb wrought-iron chandelier he made.

"I bought the equip-

Surprise: A hide-away bar and a pulley to bring food from kitchen

Pictures by Ng Weng Chee

ment on a trip to London. I haven't time to make any more."

He held up a half-finished framework in the spacious workshop in the basement of his house. "I still owe my wife this side-table."

Dr. Mahathir also believes in the supremacy of gilded plastic stick-on carving. He has brought some back from London and is having the wardrobe of his Victorian-style bedroom redone to match the stick-ons.

On his off days, he is the family boat-man. They have two motor-boats — Marinah 14 and Mirzan 13.

That afternoon the red-and-white Marinah 14 was moored to the jetty that stands on the river flowing past the Mahathir's back garden.

Two-and-a-half miles upriver is the family dusun. Abundant with rambutans, manggis, durians, petai and chempedak, it is one of their favourite picnic grounds.

The Mahathirs have

talked about teaming up to run the Alor Star clinic. "Only last year," says Dr. Hasmah, "we faced the big question again.

"I could have joined Mahathir then. My contract with the Government was up.

Hill-billy

"But we thought of the leave we won't be able to have together if I did. So we dropped the whole thing.

"I really don't know what the future will be like. Given a choice I'd rather things don't change. I like it here. It's so pleasant.

"My friends in Kuala Lumpur tell me, 'Hasmah, you're a hill-billy now. Why don't you move down with the family?' I don't want to, I say.

"But if Mahathir says we move, we'll move. He makes the decisions."

★ From Page 4

He lives in a splendid split-level house designed by Baharuddin bin Abu Kasim, the architect who did the National Mosque.

The house stands on an artificial hilllock, overlooking padi-land.

Apart from his flourishing clinic in Alor Star, six miles south of his home, he has his money in realty and a three-storey pharmaceutical firm near his dispensary.

He has also invested in tin land — "I lost several thousands in that one" — and was at one time a housing developer.

"I wanted to prove that Malays too can develop land. But after the second venture I stopped. I wasn't making much.

"I had to sell mostly to Malays and Malays are poor paymasters." He laughed offh.

"I like business. Even in primary school I was making money. I bought balloons at two cents for three and sold them at two cents each.

"I organised a tkam—using a soap-box and cheap tea-cups for prizes.

"My father was never a businessman. He was a school-teacher, the first headmaster of Alor Star's first English school (now Maktab Sultan Abdul Samad).

Let-down

"In fact, the Tengku was one of his pupils." He smiled, amused.

"My father's first and only business venture was a flop. He sold his two dusuns though I told him he shouldn't. He bought two trishaws with the money and rented them out. We never saw the rent or the trishaws again.

"My father is dead now. He named me Mahathir mainly because he had a strange liking for the letter M.

"All my four elder brothers got it—Murad, Mustafa, Mahadi and Mashahor—but the five girls who came after us didn't.

I inherited my father's nose. I suppose the Mahathir nose doesn't escape anybody's notice.

"I grew up in a very disciplined home. My father ran it like a classroom. The sound of his cough as he approached the house was enough to send us boys flying back to our books."

Murad became an officer in Serdang Agricultural College (he has since retired); Mahadi a clerk in the Kedah State Executive Service; and Mashahor a labour officer. Mustaffa died during the Japanese Occupation.

For Mahathir, the Occupation years were profitable. Refusing to work for the Japanese, he jointly ran a banana stall in Alor Star's Pekan Rabu.

He sold them, fresh and fried and served them in the coffee shop he had nearby.

True to the promise he had made himself, Mahathir, who was then in his early twenties, was better off than any of his friends.

Two years with the market folk also sharpened his awareness of their general dissatisfaction.

He himself, once thoroughly pro-British, had a bad let-down when the liberation came. The Malayan Union that the British proposed betrayed all his hopes.

He opposed it actively. Under cover of the blackout which was still imposed on Alor Star, he and several others pasted anti-British posters on street walls. British reaction was satisfying.

Mahathir Mohamed was a good student and an active unionist. He was also president of the Muslim Society. One university mate remembers him as aloof.

"He had a lot of dignity. He would join in the ragging but you could see he wasn't out for

crazy pranks. His intelligence made him a natural rallying point.

"When we got stumped with medical theories, we went to Mahathir. He read a lot and quickly, and he understood faster than any of us."

Mahathir also freelanced for the Straits Times. His pen-name was C.H.E. Det, the initials actually standing for the Malay form of address. Det is his family's pet-name for him.

Dr. Mahathir lightly recalls the stint as "one way to get money to buy myself a motor-bike." The bike was an ancient BSA 250 which broke down so often that he also became an adept mechanic.

But even then, his writings were critical evaluation of the country's economic and social problems. Mahathir pre-empted the vision of others in pressing for a Malay middle-class with the same persistence that years later made him one of the most prominent Members of Parliament.

He attacked the "padi-kuncha" system, a product of the corrupt feudalism that was strangling the life out of Kedah padi-planters; the plight of fishermen in the face of modernised fishing methods.

He spoke of the need for the Malay language to be made official, of Malay progress and the university.

Unionist

"They thought the opposition was stronger than it really was. Actually, what we did was draw them very carefully in Chinese ink."

In the post-war years he got deeper into politics. He was a member of the Sabarkas, the party that the Tengku patronised and advised.

There was Khir Johari and Senu Rahman — very prominent party members and close friends as well.

He was a member of the committee that formed the Kedah Malay Association — later one of the components of Umno.

In 1949 he qualified to enter the university. He received a grant, said goodbye to his Pekan Rabu banana-stall partner, Johari (who is still there) and went off to study medicine in Singapore.

Of the seven Malay students who enrolled, three dropped out, leaving Mahathir, Ariffin Marzuki, Abdul Rahman and a lovely girl called Hasmah binte Haji Mohamed Ali whom he courted and married.

Book ban

"I have not revised any of my views," he tells me. A prolific writer who, in his own words, writes best sitting on the pink toilet of his pink-tiled bathroom, Dr. Mahathir has put most of his thoughts into essays.

In 1969 he published several of these in a book called "The Malay Dilemma." The book, commended in part for its clear vision and elsewhere criticised for its emotionalism and cloudy solutions, was banned in Malaysia after May of that year.

Dr. Mahathir is pleased with the good reviews it has received from critics in Western Australia, the University of Columbia, New York and in London. The book, he tells me, is being used as a text in

the University of Singapore.

In an interview with The New Nation last year, Dr. Mahathir was quoted as saying that a Cabinet minister he had met had joked about his book being the source of ideas for the country's economic planning committees.

"The Government," he says it more vividly now, "is accepting them."

"I can't understand why the book is still banned. But I won't fight for its lifting."

This has always been the Mahathir pose — dignified aloofness from every controversy he engenders.

"Explanations," he says it more vividly now, tedious. The people must give you their time, the newspapers their space."

During the two years he was mothballed he has lived the silent martyr putting profuse words on paper.

Rumblings

He has written essays on "Racial Politics in Malaysia," "Democratic Nation Building" (published in a Manila monthly); "A Review of South-east Asia," "Malay Political Systems" and "Malay Modern Attitudes Toward Socialism."

His support has not diminished. Dr. Mahathir's return to Umno, a cause championed unceasingly by Umno's Pemudi, came as no surprise.

Of the notorious letter which caused the apparent setback in his political career, Dr. Mahathir says:

"I still don't know how it got circulated. I only know that what Kissinger says is true."

"No official secret is a secret with arrival of the Xerox machine. The only secret is the unwritten one."

"I don't regret what I did. Living in a rural constituency, I heard the rumblings long ago."

"The last warning I gave about possible racial strife was when I talked to the University of Malaya Graduates Society in April, that year."

"I knew the letter would cost me my future. But I felt I could bear the Tengku's displeasure better than most. I didn't have to depend on politics for a living."

"After I was expelled, people were scared to come and see me. They felt they might be incriminated. There was a policeman watching the house."

He paused, looking amused. "I didn't mind it at all. I wasn't planning to subvert the Government. Later on I moved round with the Umno people again."

"Most of my Chinese friends didn't cut themselves off. All they told me was that the Chinese were not happy over what I said. Of course, after that there was a campaign to prevent Chinese patients from coming to my clinic."

"I'm not anti-Chinese. I only insist that Malays be given a chance. It's like giving the have-nots what is theirs. Ideally, of course, one should forget race entirely and work in terms of haves and have-nots."

"Politically such a position would lose much for the party and the PMIP would benefit from it. People will always think in terms of race."

Until the "breach of party discipline" that led to his expulsion, his political performance was a series of personal triumphs that he recalls with pleasure.

"My only regret is not having stood for election earlier. I was too idealistic then. I had insisted that all candidates should be qualified men."

"I realised afterwards you've got to be fairly well-known to be taken seriously. That was why I stood for election in 1964."

Dr. Mahathir won by a majority of 4,210 votes over his PMIP opponent. But he lost in the 1969 election.

The field is now open

again. The astute 47-year-old politician who says he has not made any headway in his political career — "Tun Razak was Prime Minister at 48" — also says he will not lead Kedah Umno.

"I don't want to be Menteri Besar. I'm interested in too many things to confine myself to Kedah. I want a bigger field."

"I would like to influence national policy. The actual post is irrelevant. But it must be one through which I can engender good."