

He was bespectacled at an early age, an ardent fan of "Rockfist Rogan, R.A.F.", the librarian of his class, the perennial winner of the annual English prize. He had as little time for games during his schooldays as he has now.

But Mahathir was no mere bookworm. He sold balloons for pocket money. He became a pisang goreng seller in Alor Star's Pekan Rabu during the Japanese Occupation.

With the War's end and the start of the campaign against the colonial Malayan Union scheme, Mahathir became a political activist. For his activities, he remembers, he was taken by the then Special Branch and grilled.

The man who is Deputy Prime Minister today is a politician of 31 years' running, a strict disciplinarian, one who has tasted the bitterness of defeat as well as the sweetness of victory and its fruits. He is a man who sees his responsibilities clearly and executes them firmly, decisively. He tolerates no nonsense.

The interview below, conducted on March 21, makes plain the width of his vision and the depth of his perception. It hopefully helps to answer the question:

(P) Dr. Mahathir (Profile)

THE NEW DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER: WHAT MANNER OF MAN?

Malayan Business April 1976
● Perhaps it is over-frank Dr, but what do you say to those who fear you and think of you as an extremist Malay politician?

Well in the first place, you have to decide what is an extremist Malay politician. I don't consider myself an extremist Malay politician; I would consider myself as a very frank politician who likes to speak up whenever there is something that has to be said. For example, during the years when I was serving as a member of Parliament I made an attempt to correct various impressions that were to me quite wrong in fact. There was for example an accusation that the Government departments were filled up almost entirely by Malays. Now what I did was to go through the Federal list of office holders and I pointed out in Parliament that in actual fact in Division One for example only one third of officers were Malays. Despite the fact that we have a lot of Malays as administrative officers in the MCS actually only one-third, of the

total number of division one officers are Malays. This is a fact that I found on checking up to find out whether there was any truth in the accusation that everything is being monopolised by the Malays. Naturally when I pointed this out those who have been using this as an excuse for attacking the Government did not like me; and so they labelled me an extremist.

If speaking the truth makes one an extremist I would consider myself a Malay extremist. But if I am expected to deal with facts and the truth, I don't see how else I can get about doing things without resorting to statistics and other figures. And the other things I did made others accuse me of being an extremist — when I pointed out things which were not right in society and which had to be corrected. Was I an extremist when I pointed out that unless certain things were corrected it could lead to racial tension and it could lead to riots? In fact I spoke about this to the Selangor

Association of Graduates three months before the riots of May 1969, pointing out the exasperation among the Malays which could lead to racial clashes. Of course nobody took much heed of what I said, because people were living in a dream world at that time.

I don't consider myself extremist at all; it is a label used by my political opponents to make me sound bad even if I say very normal things. A person may say the most ordinary things, but when he gets labelled an extremist, what he says becomes "extreme" simply because he is supposed to be an extremist.

● *Do you think this frankness was among the factors which made Datuk Hussein choose you as Deputy Prime Minister? It is a quality which he may have seen in all the Deputy Prime Ministers that we have had in our history. Is frankness an important quality in a Deputy Prime Minister?*

Well, frankly I don't know why Datuk Hussein chose me, I mean specially why. I have as far as possible tried to deal squarely with the problems faced by the Ministry of Education sticking to the correct procedures irrespective of adverse criticism from people. I feel that if you are to do a good job you must be willing to be unpopular—provided that you do the right thing. Perhaps that is appreciated, perhaps that is not; I would not be able to say. Whether it influenced Datuk Hussein's thinking in making his choice on the Deputy Prime Ministership, I would not be able to say. But I would certainly imagine that if this country is going to prosper, to be stable, there is a need to . . . to be willing to face problems and to accept facts as they are, to devise methods of overcoming them in as cool and efficient a manner as possible.

● *And you say that you are cool?*

Well I try to be cool. But it is very difficult when I get criticisms from right, left and centre over my handling of the Universities and their problems. I feel that a decision has to be made and once this decision is made it has to be carried out properly. My feeling is that nothing is worse than a decision which is not carried out because of the indecisiveness of the people who are given the task of carrying out the decision. I think my training as a doctor has something to do with my attitude, I cannot make a diagnosis on the basis of unknown facts. I have to carry out the procedures that are prescribed for a situation.

● *You are very strong on discipline. What is the basis of that trait of character?*

I think discipline is absolutely necessary. In order to achieve anything, one must not allow oneself to be influenced too much by emotion. Discipline means willingness to forego one's own inclinations in order to fulfil certain objectives. For example, in the army if an order is given and is not followed, the result would certainly be chaotic. If an order is wrong but is carried out nevertheless the result is not as bad as the result of a good order which is not properly carried out. So I feel strongly that if everyone is allowed to have his own way, nothing can be achieved. If you want to live in

society you have to give up part of your personal preferences in order that the main interest of the community would be fulfilled.

● *But what, in the context of a multi-racial society like Malaysia, are the other qualities that are needed in a Deputy Prime Minister. Does he have to be acceptable to other races for example?*

Well, I think that the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia has to be acceptable, and should be liked by everybody. But that is an impossibility even in a nonmulti-racial society. In Malaysia the ideal thing would be for all communities to be happy. But this again is almost an impossibility. So the next best thing we could have in Malaysia is a state of affairs in which nobody is quite happy — neither the Malays nor the Chinese nor the Indians, which means nobody is quite fully satisfied. One chap always thinks that the other chap is getting more than what he gets.

Now if the Government favours one particular race to the extent that that race is happy, the other races will certainly not be happy, and therefore we may be heading for disaster. Now for me, the success of this country lies in the fact that no community is completely happy at a given time. Everybody thinks that the other chap is getting more.

● *But don't you think that the other side of the coin is that no particular group is that unhappy? At least there is a minimum level of satisfaction from all races.*

Of course I don't expect everyone to be absolutely

unhappy. That would be the worst. But I think a certain degree of dissatisfaction in all communities actually indicates a fairly healthy state of affairs. Well what I would like to emphasise is that if one particular community becomes extremely satisfied with everything, then one can be sure that the other communities are not getting a fair deal. And that would be bad for the country.

● *Don't you think that many of the reasons why some people are fearful of you or have apprehensions of you are nothing more than the result of sheer ignorance — they do not really know what you are like?*

That is possible of course. But I feel that there is only a small number of people who express this fear of me. The people that I have met, the Chinese or Indian, the ordinary chaps do not have this fear of me.

Since my appointment as Deputy Prime Minister, I have received about one thousand congratulatory messages. A lot of them are of course from organisations, trade unions, etc. But some of them are from individuals; Malays, Chinese and Indians who are not known to me. They just write to congratulate me. So I don't think that everybody fears me. But of course if you want to do something which is not quite in accordance with the national policy I would certainly say that those people would probably have reason to fear me — and that applies not only to the Chinese, but also to the Malays as well as the Indians.

● *What are the main problems Malaysia faces to-*

day and will face tomorrow? Is it security, is it political stability?

Actually of course at the moment security. When we talk about political stability we seem to compare our achievements with the ideal. There is no such thing as an ideal, politically stable nation. But if we compare our country with other countries, I think this country has achieved a remarkable degree of political stability despite the fact that it has many more problems than other countries. For example when we were fighting for Independence a lot of people within and outside said that this country would certainly collapse on gaining Independence. There was political immaturity, there was weakness in the administration because practically all the senior administrators are Europeans, not Malaysians.

There was this envy perhaps on the part of the Malays because of the achievement of the non-Malays and the moment they achieved Independence, an orgy of takeovers, nationalisation and general destruction of the economy would take place because the Malays would get a degree of political powers they did not have before. That as a matter of fact did not happen at all and not only has Malaysia avoided such instability. We in fact achieved such a degree of stability that the investment sector improved tremendously and certainly the economy of the country improved. If you compare our economy now with the economy before independence or if you were to compare this country even with other newly independent countries which had no racial

problems, we have done well. Political stability is I think something relative and relatively speaking we have done allright. Our present problem would be security and I think we can tackle that problem.

● *In 1970, you wrote in your book "The Malay Dilemma", that racial harmony in Malaysia "was neither real nor deep-rooted". Is this so today?*

Well I would say that a great deal has improved, although we still have a long way to go in order to achieve racial harmony. I say this because in the past, for example it would be unthinkable for a Chinese firm to take in Malay executives but now that is being done. We see Malays working as salesmen or salesgirls in the shops working in the various hotels and elsewhere and by and large we have been able to work together. Of course there are the usual complaints but the fact is that when thrown together the Malays and Chinese have been able to work and there are cases where Sino-Malay companies they have started and prospered.

● *But do these things show a real improvement, a real improvement. I suppose some people are merely knuckling down to the fact that they have to play the game with slight different rules, that they have to adhere to certain rules.*

Basically, it is true that people are acting at the urgings of the Government. But it is true that by coming to work together we will eventually learn to live and understand each other.

● *Why do you think racial harmony and national unity is still tenuous?*

There is still a great suspicion and there are still a lot of people who keep on harping and objecting to Government policies which do not coincide with their own personal ambitions or personal interest. Because of it they tend to resist. In time things are going to improve; but of course it is going to take a considerable length of time; eventually everyone will learn that they have to be together whether they like or not. It is better for them to adjust themselves.

● *What do you think we could do to improve the position on racial harmony?*

I think the best thing is for people to understand that this is absolutely necessary for this country. In order for them to understand we have to explain the reasons why racial harmony is necessary.

● *What about the feelings that poor Malays have and of course poor Chinese and Indian people have when they see certain privileges or rights going to those who are already better off in society?*

This is not really a proper question. I have been faced with this question umpteen times and I find this has become almost a cliché with some people. They just repeat it without thinking. Now I was at a university forum where there were a thousand students and the question was raised that all the Malay privileges were given to the rich Malays and the poor Malays were not given anything.

Therefore, the poor Malays, poor Chinese, poor Indians will feel unhappy. Now this was at a forum that was attended by one thousand of whom 90 per cent are receiving benefits from the Government — because without the Government they wouldn't be in the university. It is difficult for me to think that the one thousand people attending were all the sons of rich people. If they are not the sons of rich people, then they must be poor.

If they are poor and they are getting this benefit it means that the privileges are also being given to the poor. Now you make a survey of university students; they are not the sons of Ministers or rich people; they are usually sons of poor people. That is why they are kicking up a row about poverty. They are themselves beneficiaries of all the Government efforts.

● *It's true that benefits are going to the poorer people. But is there not also a certain percentage that is going to the wrong place? I suppose you may say this is inevitable in every system since no system is hundred percent efficient.*

I would not contest the point, I do not really know how many people given help should not be given help. This is again almost a cliché. People keep repeating this without actually working out the figures. How many of the wrong people are really receiving help from the Government? If you say this: that rich people are able to avail themselves of certain facilities because they are rich then, I would agree with you. For example, if a person is a rich businessman then his ability to borrow from Bank Bumiputra a large sum of money would of course be much greater than if he is a poor man. But nobody would lend money to a poor man,

because he is not going to get back the money. This is a simple fact of life — unless you abolish the system of free enterprise completely. This thing does not happen because it is government policy. It is in the nature of things that rich people are able to get better facilities than poor people. You can only stop this thing from happening if you abolish rich people altogether. And that means of course a controlled socialist society or a communist dictatorial society. If you like it of course you can have that. But if you are going to have this society and have a good life there is bound to be somebody who is rich and somebody who is poor. Sometimes I would like to ask everybody this question, it is purely an academic question: if everyone is a millionaire, is everyone rich? Because you have to pay one million dollars to every man for his service it will make you a poor man also. You have to pay a million dollars to your driver to drive your car, it makes you a very poor man. In other words if everybody has the same amount of money, even if it is a million dollars, everybody will be poor.

● *In the fifties, you wrote a great deal about the problems of the Malays under the name C.H.E. Det. What were your main arguments then?*

If you can recall most of the articles tell of the poverty of the Malays: the padi planter, the fishermen. At that time nobody appears to have highlighted their plight, and I felt that I should focus attention on their problems and of course on seeking a solution to the problems. These were the days before independence. I felt that the only solution to the problem lay in getting back power to us so that with the power we can tackle the problems. This includes developing the Malay Language as well as the culture of the country. I feel that we have come a long way from that state of affairs. My opinion has not changed much except that we have now been able to reduce the problem which was to me terrible in those days.

● *Would you say that you were at least 10 years ahead of the country?*

Well I would not be able to say. Certainly what I wrote in those days was considered quite new because nobody was writing in the Press on the development of Malay as a new modern language or their culture. That was because there were not very many Malays who could write to the Press. I was a freelance journalist, I was not employed . . .

● *How much were you paid, do you remember?*

Well there were articles for which I earned \$40. Well, I was able to buy a motor cycle when I was a student in the University.

● *What do you think is the path of economic salvation for the Malays?*

Actually the Government has attended to many problems facing the Malays. Of course the solutions have not been absolute. There are lots of Malays who still face these problems. In the past there has been a lot of talk about the lack of capital, lack of opportunities. I feel strongly that capital and opportunities are important; but the most important thing is the ability to manage

businesses, big or small, an understanding of business. That is much more important.

I say that because if you take a company or a firm which is doing extremely well, and hand it over to people who do not know how to manage, the fact that there is capital and opportunity, there is already an established business, does not mean that it is going to remain viable. This does not only apply to the Malays, but to anybody who does not know business, for example the nationalisation of the British coal and steel industry. At one time, the steel industry produced lots of British millionaires. But today the British steel industry is bankrupt and needs subsidies from the Government — mainly because it is not well managed and it is not capable at all of competing with the Japanese steel industry which is well managed. So it is the inability to manage business which is affecting the Malays most at the moment; and there is the need for them to learn business methods, business management, before they launch into business. Those Malays who have learnt have done well.

● *You have also said in the past that the Malays were deficient in certain attitudes. Have you changed on that?*

No I don't think I have changed at all. I still feel very strongly that in order to succeed one must be prepared to accept difficulties, to tackle them. The idea that all difficulties can be legislated away, because now we have our own govt. for example, is very wrong.

It is not going to solve the problem if you are go-

ing to do business. To do any piece of work, you have to learn and to learn is always a very difficult process. But there is no running away from it. So attitudes towards learning, towards hard work, towards education, towards accepting the fact that there will be failures and there will be problems all the time, all these things must change.

● *How can the attitudes be changed?*

By telling them the whole truth. The more you say that this can be overcome merely by legislation or by resort to political power, the more you are going to fail. Political power is good. But I have said over and over again: if you are sitting on a piece of land with gold ore underneath but you don't know how to mine, you are not going to get any riches out of it. So the thing to do now is to accept our difficulties and attend to the work at hand.

● *On the need to build up a corps of Malay executives in business, do you think there is too much tokenism?*

Well obviously this happens. People employ Malays because they are required to so employ. On the other hand, if a person is able to contribute positively, then people are going to employ that person irrespective of his racial or other background. Now this is also a fact: some Malays prefer not to employ Malays but to employ Chinese. When I ask them why; they tell me "you know, this is a business, not a charity." Now if you have that attitude you cannot expect others to have a different attitude towards you. This is one of the facts.

On the other hand there is also a need for those people who have been given opportunities through tokenism to prove themselves; and this again involves a certain attitude. The fact is that they have to work with people who are initially hostile to them; they have to overcome hostility to them. This is one of the difficulties they have to face.

● *On the other hand, do you think the Malays are taking full advantage of the opportunities that have opened up to them?*

I won't say so, I don't think they have, for example, in the field of education. This is my main complaint for opportunities have been given to them and it is thrown aside. That is why I feel that some people waste opportunities. Even in the field of business people do not train themselves or do not change their attitude in order to make use of the opportunities to gain and benefit as they should. Of course, there will be people who will say, well, they are pressed down by obstructions put in the way by other people. But the fact is that there are these opportunities and unless they are prepared to avail themselves in spite of these difficulties they are not going to benefit.

● *Do you think the Malays will respond, come up in the world?*

Yes I think they will because Malays are like everybody else. But if you keep on making life soft for them, when they do something wrong you say its okay, its alright for example if they go to an institution where they have to learn and they play

around....well...I do not feel any compunction about being very harsh with people who are given the opportunities but do not make use of them.

● *What do you think are the primary concerns or worries of the non-Malays in general today?*

Well basically I think they feel that they are being deprived of opportunities. Comparatively speaking I would say yes. In the past Malays did not constitute any competition. But now the non-Malays have to share these opportunities with others the Malays in particular and they are required to give in sometimes. I think this causes a feeling of unhappiness among some non-Malays. But that is only relative to the past and even in the past you will find that opportunities were limited — because during the British regime certain fields of business were reserved for the British. But because the non-Malays accepted it is as a right of the British, there was no feeling of unhappiness. Now they expect that they should get everything and if somebody gets in the way they feel unhappy. But if they were to compare the opportunities here with opportunities in other countries, they will find life in Malaysia does not warrant their concern or fear. The fact that so many would like to come here and stay shows that it is not such a bad country at all.

● *But isn't this a sad commentary on our failure or the failure of the Government to get the message across to the non-Malays that the Malays must be helped? We have not succeeded fully in convincing the non-Malays that it is their interest and in the interest of the nation and morality and plain human decency that you must help the Malays. Isn't this an indictment? Have we failed to get the message across?*

Actually, I was talking recently to a foreign correspondent on the problem of the different races of the country and after explaining to him what happened he asked: "Haven't your public relations failed completely in this matter?" I would say in terms of public relations we have not done too well. The reason why this man made his remark was that I explained to him that there is no Government project in this country that is entirely for the benefit of one group. Then I cited the Muda Irrigation Scheme on which the Government spent \$340 million constructing irrigation canals so that the Malay padi farmers will be able to produce padi twice a year. Now you would say that the Government is spending \$340 million to help the Malays only; but if you look at it carefully, the \$340 million went first to non-Malays who worked as contractors, workers....on the scheme. So initially the \$340 million went more to the non-Malays. Now the scheme is completed, Malays sow the padi and when it is sold the income of the Malays is doubled which means that twice the amount of cash is floating in Kedah at a given period than before. What happens to that cash? The Malays do not keep the money and as a result of that money floating around a lot of businessmen from other States have flowed into Alor Star to sell textiles, goods, motor cars, etc. And apart from that, I have to mention that when Kedah produces twice the amount of padi it helps to save the spending of a lot of people in the south. During a time of inflation,

when the price of rice goes up, it is the price of Kedah rice which helps to lower the price of rice throughout the country, which means that all races benefitted from that \$340 million spent by the Government.

● *Do you think the non-Malays have anything to fear for their future?*

I don't think there is anything for them to fear. The people who fear are the people who want to make everything for themselves. For the average non-Malays, there is nothing to fear. They have more opportunities in this country, than anywhere else. You must remember not so long ago, two Chinese students who were in Australia tried to work as cooks, but they were not allowed to. But if those same people come back here they can work and become millionaires, not only cooks. If they want to become millionaires in this country, they can if they work hard enough, and a lot of them have become millionaires.

● *There has been a lot of talk lately about the lack of morality in business. What are your views on this?*

I would say this; I do not condone corruption in low places or high places. Now lots of people say that you should pay attention to high places to get the big fry. But I think that is the wrong attitude because it is corruption among the small fry that affects the poor people. Now the ordinary Malay farmer who goes to the office to pay \$5 to get something done, which should be done free, is affected by that sort of corruption. He is not directly affected by the millions of dollars that are involved in corruption in higher places. The big corruption

is of course equally bad and it should in fact not happen. In fact corruption as a whole at whatever level should be stopped. And that is actually a function of the morality of the people in this country.

● *But don't you think in recent times in business certainly there has been a tremendous increase in immorality and a lowering of the ethics of business?*

I think things have been allowed to slide in business. It all begins of course with the very normal thing called a commission. You ask somebody to sell something, you pay him a commission. Now where does commission end and corruption begin? It is sometimes difficult to know.

● *Do you think that this country is ready now for a clean-up-Malaysia campaign?*

Actually of course there is no right time. Any time is the right time to keep the country clean. We should always be striving for a clean society. At any time.

● *What are your views on nationalisation?*

Well I have very definite views on this. In the first place, I don't accept nationalisation as a doctrine. I don't think it will work for it will damage the country. But I feel that certain types of industries should be State managed. Now these industries for example communications not mass media, but telephones, etc. should not be allowed to be managed by private enterprise. Railways, airlines these are essential for the country, we cannot think of them entirely in terms of profits. But it would be damaging to spread the nationalisation net wide. As I said I do not believe in nationalisation as a doctrine. In fact as a doctrine, I strongly oppose it.

to improve myself. As a teacher again, he was a very strict man and this perhaps affected my attitude towards discipline. At one time as a child I resented discipline. But I soon learnt that it was worthwhile. I went to University in Singapore. I did a lot of writing in 1946. My first article was written and published in the Sunday Times and I think it was on Malay women.

● *Did you have a hard childhood?*

I did not walk 10 miles to school but I did walk barefoot. I'd go by rickshaw to school and walk back home, a distance of about two miles and believe me it was very uncomfortable walking with bare feet on uneven stony roads in the hot sun. And not much money also. I used to sell things, like buying balloons for one cent and selling them for 1½ cents. Two cents capital gave me an extra one cent pocket money.

I went to Malay school up to Standard Two. And then I went to Primary One in the English school and Primary Two and I caught up with the others by jumping from Standard Four to Six.

● *How about your intellectual roots? Who were your inspiration?*

The only thing that affected me greatly was the fact that in my house there were huge quantities of English books and very early on — I don't know at what age, I read a tremendous amount. When I was in Standard Four I was made the class librarian which meant that every Thursday I bought the week's supply of magazine, like Rover, Champion, etc. So I could have the magazines with me through Friday and Saturday. Within 2½ days I would finish all these stories including... Rockfist Rogan, R.A.F. and that year, I topped the class in English I think there was a tremendous improvement in my English because I became a librarian. But my eyesight became bad. Nevertheless for me, the weekend was the greatest time because I could continue reading my serial stories.

● *What have been the high points of your life?*

Having to work as a pisang goreng seller during the Japanese times was one. I was about sixteen or seventeen. I still have friends today who were my partners in business who now run stalls at the Pekan Rabu in Alor Star. Two of my partners of those days have done well, one of whom Zulkifly now works in the Ministry of Education as the head of the Bahagian Biasiswa and the other chap is Aziz Ahmad, who is a mechanical engineer. He now works as the chief inspector of machinery. The other high points were my first involvement in politics immediately after the war. When we put up anti-Malay Union posters during the blackout. I was grilled by the CID. This was in 1946 by a chap called Ah Ngan who died. He was killed by the communists. It was quite a thing for a 19-year student to be called and questioned by the Special Branch.

● *Finally Dr, what are your hopes and fears for this country?*

I think this is a great country. I think it has opportunities for everyone. Given the type of attitudes that we have among the majority of the people of all races, this country can continue to prosper.

● *How about your views on foreign investment?*

Foreign investment is never totally foreign because in the first place they have to be located in this country and therefore they are subjected to your laws and if they misbehave you will be in a position to do something about it. If they misbehave absolutely, it would be possible to take over completely. So long as they are creating job opportunities I see no reason why they shouldn't come in. But there is the need for the nationals of this country to acquaint themselves with the new industries so that eventually we would be able to manage or even start our own industries without having to rely on foreign know-how.

● *You have said that school history books should be rewritten in such a way that students will feel proud of the achievements of the country's leaders. Do you think that enough is being done in our schools, through the teaching of Civics and such like, to create or foster a sense of national pride, civic responsibility and Malaysian nationalism?*

I don't think enough is being done. A lot more should be done but in order to do it properly the attitudes of teachers should be closely looked at. For example, if you want to develop national unity by focusing action on the national leaders of recent past, it may be possible that a teacher who is inclined towards socialism would regard the achievement of Tunku Abdul Rahman as not being worthy of being lauded. And of course he is not going to instill pride in the students with regard to the achievements of the Tunku. There would be a conflict then between the interests of the teacher and the teaching that he is supposed to pass on to the students.

● *Now we go to your personal background. What are your roots?*

The fact is that my father was a teacher and I had a very strict up-bringing. Studying hard was one of the things he insisted on and as a result I managed