

DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD: PROFILE

A few months after he became the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gathered his country's envoys and briefed them on his foreign policy priorities. It was, and still is, ASEAN, relations with Third World countries, the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Commonwealth in that order of importance to his government.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over the helm of government in July, 1981 and he is now serving his second term of office. He had led his National Front coalition to a resounding victory at the polls last year for another five-year term under the country's parliamentary democratic system.

Born in Alor Setar, capital of northwestern Kedah state, on Dec. 20, 1925, Dr Mahathir had his early education at a Malay school before attending a Government English school in his hometown.

His studies was interrupted for four years when the Japanese army took over the country in the Second World War. It was during this time that the young Mahathir tried his hands at business by setting up a food stall. It was this experience that is taken to partly explain his zeal, or, even haste, in the economic development of his nation and people.

In 1947, he entered University Malaya, the country's premier varsity then located in Singapore and obtained his medical degree. The young Mahathir entered politics even before his varsity days when in 1945, he joined several organisations among which were the Kedah Malay Union and later, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in the present ruling 13-party National Front coalition.

In 1964, he stood for his first polls on the Alliance ticket (the Alliance being the forerunner of the NF coalition) in the Kota Setar Selatan parliamentary seat and won. He, however, lost it in 1969. It was during this time that he became prominent as a "young Turk" and a loud critic of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the nation's first prime minister. Expelled from the party, he wrote a book called the "Malay Dilemma" that capsulated his thoughts and ideas about the backwardness and poverty of his Malay people. That book, banned by his predecessors for more than a decade, is now a reference book and a basis of his administration and goals.

He is married to Dr Siti Hasmah and they are blessed with five children -- three boys and two girls. They also adopted an Afghan boy and girl.

"His name spells like controversy, but there is no arguing that his is a classic tale of the phoenix rising from the ashes," wrote a Malaysian journalist during Dr Mahathir's early days of office.

Dr Mahathir had created many a "diplomatic wave" since he came into office. While his three predecessors tended to build their foreign policies on the legacy of the British colonial masters, he turned his back on Westminster. His public pronouncement on the inertia of the British Commonwealth and his refusal to attend any Commonwealth meeting, coupled with his "Look East" policy, marked a controversial episode of his foreign policy.

But, in the face of these developments, Dr Mahathir has remained steadfast in his beliefs in ASEAN. His foreign policy is a policy of regionalism, anchored on ASEAN.

What is left to be seen is how he will make his mark in the 3rd ASEAN summit, fittingly held during his tenure of office.

"I wish to emphasize that in so as Malaysia is concerned, ASEAN remains in the forefront of our foreign policy priorities. The rationale behind this Government's thinking in this regard is the vital role of ASEAN as a stabilising influence and as a catalyst in developing the economic resilience of the region." (Dr Mahathir: Jan 14, 1982). pls ack