

MAHATHIR: THE MAN AND THE PM

In the complexity that makes the man Mahathir — his reticence yet bluntness, traditionalism yet boldness in bringing change — one quality which stands out is his consummate political skill.

BY MIDNIGHT, April 26, 1987, a hush of expectancy had settled over the large throng milling about restlessly in the spacious grounds of Seri Perdana. Finally Kamaruzaman 'Kip' Bahadun, the former executive secretary of Umno (the United Malays National Organisation) approached the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with the official results.

Recalls Kip, 'I told him he'd won and gave him his margin of victory over Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. He was impassive, showing no emotion whatsoever. He asked about Ghafar and I told him that Ghafar had won, too. Then I offered him my congratulations. He smiled slightly.'

Considering the stakes of that particular victory (the presidency of Umno and hence the Prime Ministership of the country) and the magnitude of the challenge put up by the Razaleigh-Datuk Musa Hitam faction, it might be an understatement of sorts to call Mahathir a controlled individual. Says an academic who has had occasion to work with the Prime Minister, 'He's a cold fish.'

'**LIKE ICE**'. A foreign journalist recalls being astonished by Mahathir one morning in August 1986. It was 4am in the Putra World Trade Centre and it had become plain that the Barisan National, and especially Umno, had won massively in the 1986 general election. Says the reporter, 'Here was a guy who should have felt vindicated after all the speculation that the Barisan might lose. I mean, he could have at least looked happy.' Not so. Mahathir was, according to the journalist, 'like ice'.

It is, above all, a clinically practical approach which gets manifested in everything he does. A deputy minister recalls the day after the recent ISA arrests. It was a Wednesday and the PM had just finished his speech in Parliament where he had detailed the reasons for the arrests and the closure of three newspapers.

Says the deputy, 'After his speech, he was supposed to chair a post-Cabinet meeting with all deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries in the PM's department. Everybody came because we hoped that we might get some more information about the arrests. I mean, it was the biggest

thing to happen for a long time. But he didn't talk about that at all. Instead the whole meeting was devoted to the beautification of Kuala Lumpur.'

All of which lends itself to his mystique which grows relentlessly, out of all proportion to the man himself. Mahathir is arguably the most analysed Prime Minister ever, the most relentlessly examined, the most *controversial*. Whether dispassionate historical analysis will bear this out is a moot point but that is the *perception* today.

And perception is certainly relative as **Malaysian Business** found out. Opinions about the man, among people who have worked with him, differ enormously, even over the most commonplace things. Stand-out example: some of those interviewed believed, and quite firmly, too, that the PM had no sense of humour whatsoever. (He has, according to friends, a dry wit. When asked once by Alex Lee, the deputy agriculture minister, what kind of exercise he engaged in, the PM replied succinctly, 'Breathing.')

By all accounts, Dr Mahathir Mohamad is something of an enigma. He is a politician whose blunt, no-nonsense style clashes oddly with a political culture that is essentially consensual. More than anything else, according to his friends, he is a shy, reticent individual and yet his combative public image barely hints at this. And in an occupation where public relations is, to say the least, important, the man, much to the despair of many of his aides, simply does not bother. 'I think he privately feels he's much misunderstood,' says the deputy minister, 'but he doesn't seem to give a damn.'

In the process he is said to have alienated many people, including some elements in the civil service. Explains an aide, 'He came in bustling with ideas for change. Other-PMs used to let the civil service have their own way. That was safer, there could be no controversy. Not him. He shook them up. What do you expect?'

Another friend has a more personal explanation. Says he, 'It's very difficult to read the PM's mind. He looks and sounds exactly the same whether he's bored, indifferent, excited or pleased. And he's never been known to compliment anybody. So it's very frustrating not knowing whether he

likes your idea or not. But, I've never seen him lose his temper either, although he can be very sarcastic. That's part of his make-up. So people don't know what he wants or how he feels and so, I guess, they feel uncomfortable.'

Most analysts, however, agree that luck has a lot to do with how a Prime Minister rates and, in this context, Mahathir might be said to be unlucky. He took over the administration at a point when the country was sliding into its worst peace-time recession since 1932. 'The key is economics,' says an academic, 'and when the cake starts to shrink, people will take out their frustrations somewhere. And the buck stops with him.'

According to some people, Mahathir cannot understand that it was he himself who sowed the seeds for change within Umno. Says an Umno veteran, 'Our politics used to be very veiled, very obtuse, typical *wayang kulit* stuff. Mahathir started this blunt, abrasive approach. In a way, he's helped to alter our political culture.'

Others are not so sure. 'The stakes are so much higher now,' says a political scientist. 'Some people see politics as a sure-fire way to money and power.'

And yet, paradoxically, Mahathir remains a traditionalist at heart (see accompanying interview). 'He's a great believer in the grand traditions of Umno,' says a friend. Alex Lee agrees somewhat ruefully, 'When it comes to seat allocations between the MCA and the Gerakan he'll always go for the MCA, not so much because that's the right thing as that it is the traditional thing. You know, in the Alliance tradition.'

Has he changed over the years? Many people think so. They read his once-controversial *Malay Dilemma* and they conclude that this is not the same man who is now the Prime Minister. Mahathir does not think so. 'I'm the same person,' he says. Neither do some of his friends.

Some assert that he has grown more reclusive, more secretive but, according to Alex Lee, 'he has always been very private.' His political secretary, Mohamad Nor Azam, concurs. Says he, 'One Saturday I went to see him about some ISA detainees, about when they might be released. He didn't tell me anything at all. This was in the afternoon. When I got home there was this news on TV about 16 detainees having been released. I mean, the PM definitely knew about this when I was talking to him a only few hours before but he didn't say anything. You see, that is the man.'

The country's first finance minister, Tun H S Lee once described the Tunku as a classic case of 'the iron hand within the velvet glove'. Mahathir, apparently, is exactly the opposite. 'He puts on a tough act,' says a friend, 'and so people get intimidated by that. They find it difficult to get close to him. Maybe he feels that he should put this on to hide that velvet hand.'

A political scientist compares Mahathir to Lee Kuan Yew and the Tunku and concludes startlingly, 'I would actually say he's weak. The other two would have crushed their enemies absolutely. Mahathir lets them remain.' And the Prime Minister seems to be aware of this, his so-called 'weakness' (see interview).

Many of his friends agree. Says one, 'After Musa resigned, a lot of us advised him (Mahathir) to drop Musa faithfuls as candidates for the 1986 elections because we anticipated trouble later on. But he refused. Fully 99 per cent of final Umno candidates were those picked by the state liaison committees. The PM simply didn't interfere.'

Mahathir apparently feels that he hasn't got time, that he has to push things through as fast as possible. He took over the Premiership when he was 56, at a time when the NEP was slated to expire in nine years. 'Maybe at the beginning he thought he'd have to do 20 years' work in nine years.' Nor Azam agrees, 'Many people have told me to tell him to slow down, that he was introducing new policies too fast for people to comprehend, that people were getting antagonistic.'

Mahathir's answer, according to Nor Azam ... 'I don't know how long I'll be here. If you're going to have to wait for everyone to agree with you before you start something, you'll never get anything done. You can wait, retain the *status quo*, but that's not what leadership is all about.' Criticism, according to the man, will always be around, no matter what anyone does.

Indeed, it is a familiar situation, the lot of all leaders who attempt change. Robert Kennedy was once reported to have said, 'At any given time at least one quarter of the people will be against everything you do.' It was a telling remark, born out of the frustration Kennedy harboured over the labels that were being pinned on him.

In Mahathir's case, however, people allege that he has changed, that he has grown increasingly intolerant of criticism. The former deputy home minister, Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, was picked by Mahathir personally. Radzi remembers the excitement he felt when he got a call from the PM inviting 'me to become a parliamentary secretary'.

Radzi still cannot forget his first meeting with the PM. 'He told all of us to set exam-

ples,' he recalls. 'That we couldn't go around tinting our (car) windshields, for instance.'

That we shouldn't flaunt our wealth, even if it was legitimate. That our wives shouldn't be seen draped with diamonds. He told us ... you can accept the odd hamper or two but not the three or five per cent cut. He warned us that he would know.

I have tried to live my life according to that speech. It was the most inspiring thing I had ever heard.'

That was then. Radzi is now out of government and thinks that the PM has changed. 'He's intolerant,' says Radzi. 'Once he's judged you, made up his mind about you, you're finished. He does not look at the other side of the story.'

Others disagree with this assessment. 'I think he's received, and accepted, the most criticism any Prime Minister has ever had to put up with,' says the political scientist. 'And after so much, you've got to re-teach everyone the rules of democracy. It's like a

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hockey game. If people get too rough, you rap them on the shins, you take them out of the game for a while.'

Again it would be understating it to say that Mahathir has had a meteoric rise. He was an Umno member in 1946 but he only joined the government in the 1970s. Why? 'He was seen to be left of centre,' says Datuk Abdullah Ahmad, Tun Razak's former political secretary, 'and Umno was very conservative then.'

The man has had perhaps more than his fair share of setbacks. He entered Parliament in 1964 but was a backbencher. In 1969 He lost his seat and, shortly after that, got himself expelled from Umno when he incurred the wrath of the Tunku. He remained close to Tun Razak, however, and this stood him in good stead. After Razak took over, Mahathir was made chairman of Fima and then a senator. Recalls Abdullah, 'Even his senatorship was opposed by Kedah Umno Youth. Razak had to intervene personally.'

After that, Mahathir's rise was meteoric; education minister and, after Razak's death, deputy prime minister and minister of trade and industry. In 1981, when Tun Hussein Onn stepped down citing ill health, Mahathir assumed the highest office in the land.

Much has happened since then. There have been numerous mini-crises, the resignation of his deputy prime minister Musa Hitam and an unprecedented challenge from Razaleigh, but they all seem to have left him unmoved. In an interview with *Asiaweek*, Mahathir described himself as a 'political genius'. Few would dispute that contention. He went into the 1986 general election against the advice of some of his advisers and pulled off Umno's biggest victory since 1959. And despite severely formidable opposition he has managed to carry Umno. How does he do it? 'Mahathir is his own counsel, his own best friend,' replies Abdullah. 'All of what you hear about certain people having tremendous influence on him is a myth.'

Today the PM seems to be in as much of a hurry as before. He goes in to work before eight and rarely leaves before six. At least two nights a week has to go towards speaking engagements. He reads voraciously — storybooks, economics and books on management mostly — and likes the theatre.

Who were his biggest influences? 'Among present world leaders?' asks the PM, then answering his question, 'None. But I had a great admiration for (Winston) Churchill over the way he conducted the war. Among Malaysian politicians I suppose it would be Tun Razak.'

GOOD EXERCISE. In 1984 he took up horseback-riding after President Zia-ul-Haq presented him with two horses. The Sultan of Pahang chipped in with another three (one has since died) and Mahathir found himself with no choice but to learn to ride. 'It's good exercise,' he says.

Two years ago he took up flying. 'I have no licence,' says the PM, 'but I go up in a twin seater with an instructor. The main thing is, I know how to fly.' He doesn't think his job is all that stressful either. 'When I was a private practitioner I used to work longer hours and there was greater stress. There people's lives could be in my hands. Now, of course, they could be, too, but in an indirect way. Anyhow, now I don't act alone. There is collective responsibility.'

And what would he like to do when he retires? Would he go for something else? There is speculation, for instance, that he would not be averse to the post of UN secretary general. 'No,' says he. 'When I retire, I don't want to be involved in anything else.' — S Jayasankaran 