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BEYOND THE CONTROVERSY

(P) Profile

EMERGING from his first Cabinet meeting as Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad shocked the waiting journalists when he told them that the two things decided upon were to grow more trees in the cities and to clean up public toilets.

Expecting the Prime Minister to make yet another controversial statement, many of them were disappointed with his toilet and tree stories. It was unlike Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir.

Soon more trees, palms and flowering plants began to line Kuala Lumpur streets. Today the city is green, the gardens are well tended and the streets are cleaner. But the battle to keep public toilets clean is far from successful.

But those who have followed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's chequered career saw yet another side to the man: the ordinary Mahathir. The Mahathir that does not allow anything to pass his sight without scrutiny.

Very seldom that anything of interest escapes the attention of the doctor from Kedah. This has something to do with his medical training, where the power to observe is an essential tool.

The chief executive officer of a large mining company, whose office is situated on the route to the Prime Minister's office, received a phone call from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's office early one morning.

Expecting something important, he was absolutely surprised when he was told that the Prime Minister had noticed wild creepers growing on the roof of his building. The message was explicit — remove the creepers.

On another occasion, while driving on his own around the city during the weekend, he noticed that holes dug by water, telephone and city authorities were left unfilled.

He observed that the same spot would be dug up at different times by different authorities and most of them would do so during the busiest time of the week.

The order soon went from the Prime Minister's Department that if holes had to be dug, best that the various authorities got together to do it at the same time. And as for resurfacing the roads, it was to be done either at night or during the weekend, so as not to hinder traffic.

In public, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir is almost incapable of showing affection. He seldom compliments people even when they deserve it. But if someone he cares for or trusts is criticised or harmed, he would instantly come to his defence.

In fact, said a close aide, it was almost impossible to convince Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir that some people do not deserve his favour. But all they had to do was to write a sad appeal letter and he would go out of his way to help.

The only Malay private medical practitioner in Alor Star in the Sixties, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir would give free medical treatment or charge nominal fees to the poor padi farmers and their families.

His services were so widely sought after

by the ordinary Malays that his opponents from the Islamic party (PAS) warned their supporters during the 1969 general elections not to seek treatment from the "Doktor Umno" for fear that he might give them lethal injections. Some believed them.

Yet, said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's close friends and aides, this is the side of the man that is least visible and hence least appreciated. Beyond the newspaper headlines and the television news, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir is a different person — a devoted family man, a kind person and a good friend.

Asked why he seldom smiles and why his handshake is not firm, he quickly replied that by nature that was him. While not lacking a sense of humour totally, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's jokes can be as sharp as his criticisms.

In a meeting with him just after his coronary bypass operation earlier this year, the writer made a mistake of not shaking his hand firmly enough. He remarked: "Your handshake is too soft, how can you hope to become a politician."

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir does not have to be deliberate to be controversial. He is controversial. It is his nature to be open and frank. He calls a spade a spade. Above all, he believes in speaking his mind and do what he thinks is right.

As a medical student at the University of Malaya in Singapore in the late Forties and early Fifties, he contributed regularly to the Straits Times using the pen-name "Che Det". He was already controversial.

He wrote on topics such as what caused the Malays to be backward, the Malay royal households losing their royal characteristics, economic and political suppression of the Malays and the effects of development on them.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir later produced a number of guidebooks on topics such as

how to become a successful small trader, based on his experience as a part-time trader at the famous Pekan Rabu in Alor Star.

"If we have an idea about a certain thing, it is our responsibility to implement it. We cannot depend on others," he said when he was asked why he did not take longer leave after his surgery.

In fact, said his aides, many of whom had to accompany him on his post-surgical exercises recommended by his doctors, it was difficult to get Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir to rest. He is a confirmed workaholic.

His day starts at dawn with the Suboh prayer — the first of five Muslim daily prayers. He clocks in at 7.45 am and stays back until 5.00 or 6.00 pm. The evenings are often filled with official dinners and political engagements.

He has boundless energy. During election campaigns, he travels for hours by helicopters over the jungles of Sarawak or Pahang, drops in at a remote settler community to address them and moves on to the next. It is common for this to happen at four or five different places from morning to midnight.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir shocked the English-speaking world when not long after assuming the premiership, he announced the policy of "Buy British Last" and at the same time, embraced the Look East Policy. **BT 18 OCT 1989**

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He alleged the British of taking Malaysia for granted. But it was the hostile British reaction to the takeover of Guthrie Corporation by the National Investment Corporation (PNB) in a famous dawn raid at the London Stock Exchange in 1981 and the raising of tuition fees for

economic and political standing 12 years after the country became independent.

He believed that an economic answer must be found to the problem of inequality among the races in Malaysia. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir compounded the allegation against the Tunku by writing a highly provocative book, "The Malay Dilemma," which was instantly banned by the Tunku's Government.

The book, which was translated into a number of languages, remained banned in Malaysia until a few years after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister.

In those troubled days following the May 1969 race riots, the non-Malays, in particular the Chinese, shuddered at the thought of having a man like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir as Prime Minister.

But the Tunku's successor, the late Tun Razak, was also a suspect simply because as Deputy Prime Minister, he advocated deliberate efforts to raise the standard of living of the Malays and introduce them to commerce and industry.

There was fear that he would relegate the economic and political interest of the

Malaysian students studying in British colleges and universities that sparked off the confrontation.

But the Look East Policy was never meant to replace the country's Western orientation. It was to show Malaysians that there are positive aspects of the Eastern work habits that they should emulate.

It was never intended to give an economic edge to the Japanese in preference over the West. The Japanese were already a major foreign investor in Malaysia then.

But, today that is history. The relations with the United Kingdom, said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's aides, are perhaps at their best, contributed to a large extent by the close understanding between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher.

With that, and his greater exposure to international politics, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's stand on international relations and issues has gone through considerable transformation. Still, he does not believe in conventional diplomacy and in empty compliments. He believes in action.

The mending of fences with the United Kingdom and greater contacts with other member states of the Commonwealth helped to change his stand on the Commonwealth, leading to his active participation in the Nassau and Vancouver meetings.

Aides said despite Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's unsmiling face, harsh words and frankness, he is not unrelenting. On the contrary, he is very adaptable to change.

At the height of his confrontation with the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in 1969, he adopted a very critical stand on race relations in Malaysia, leading to the Tunku branding him a Malay "ultra" or extremist.

While the Tunku blamed the instigators and the extremists for the bloodshed, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir saw the swift retaliation of the Malays against the taunts and the jeers by the non-Malay victory marchers in Kuala Lumpur as an indication of their dissatisfaction with their

non-Malays in favour of the poor Malays. The fear was unfounded. Though Tun Razak was instrumental in introducing the New Economic Policy in 1970, he treated all Malaysians fairly and the country's economic boom started.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir was much of the same mould, plus of course, the controversies following the 1969 riots. However, when he was named the successor by the country's third Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn, in 1981, he was accepted by the majority of the Malaysians.

What makes Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir different from his predecessors is his frankness in speaking his mind and his willingness to make unpopular decisions, leading to his opponents accusing him of dictatorial tendencies.

That did not hurt him. Defending the arrest of some 100 people, including members of his own party, Umno, and the National Front Coalition under the Internal Security Act in October 1987, he said it was better for him to take preventive action to stop the racial strife deteriorating rather than to act after something uglier had happened.

He was reminded of the failure of the authorities to anticipate racial clashes when they allowed the victorious opposition parties to parade through the streets of Kuala Lumpur in May 1969 during which racial slurs were hurled at the Malays.

It was only after the riots, which cost several hundred lives and much more in material damage, that the clampdown started. The climax of that incident was the suspension of democracy and civil liberties for nearly two years.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir believes that less freedom is better than no freedom at all in a multi-racial and multi-religious country like Malaysia. The doctor believes that prevention is always better than cure.
— *By A Kadir Jasin.*

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