

In perfect pitch

First Lady Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali talks about Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first shot at elected office; about how the family fared following his expulsion from Umno and the banning of his book, *The Malay Dilemma*; and then his rise to the pinnacle of power in the second of a two-part series.

● **See pages 2&3**

Through thick and thin together

THE YEAR was 1964. It was a heady time for the young Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his family. The general election over, he was the new Member of Parliament for the Kotar Setar seat in Kedah.

Suddenly there were more responsibilities for the busy doctor, some which required him to be in Kuala Lumpur. Soon a new routine was established.

"He had a lot of work in KL - parliamentary meetings, new appointments (chairman of the University Council and vice-chairman of the working committee on the proposed national university) - and he had to spend all his weekends there."

Kedah's Thursday-Friday weekend allowed Dr Mahathir to spend two full working days in Kuala Lumpur.

"Every Thursday, he would catch the train to KL and then he would catch the train back to Bukit Mertajam on Friday night and our driver would pick him up from there."

With his long-time commitment to Umno, Dr Mahathir's progression from local community leader to national politician was not unexpected. "He had been in politics all the time so it was a very natural progression," Dr Siti Hasmah explains.

She adds: "We never discussed it, he never had to tell me but I knew he was interested and that he wanted to stand for a proper post.

Still, she never imagine that her husband would one day become the prime minister.

"I thought he would always be a doctor but he made it (in politics) by himself. He started from the bottom and worked his way up in a proper way, without much fuss.

"Now it's different. If you want something, you have to campaign and get your supporters. In the old days, it was much simpler because there were not many who were interested. It was like the college authorities letting me repeat after I failed my first year. There were so few of us (Malay girls) it was like: 'here's one,

we'll take her!'

"As my husband says, in those days, it was hard to even get someone to become president of the party (Umno). (The late) Tunku (Abdul Rahman) had to be coaxed into accepting the presidency even though he was the most capable after Onn Jaafar (resigned from the party). We also had to coax people to be candidates in the elections. It was typical Malay (modesty): *tak payarlah, tak layaklah* (no need, not qualified)."

The demands on Dr Mahathir were

very taxing; he had to juggle a private practice and public office.

"It was very hard on him but he welcomed the change from being cooped up in the clinic and seeing patients everyday."

Dr Siti Hasmah wasn't having an easy time either. While Dr Mahathir had his responsibilities, she had hers - the children and her work.

"When I was in Beijing (for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in September), I was asked whether I com-

Going on an annual holiday is a must for Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah but they aren't able to do it locally. Dr Siti Hasmah explains why:

“We can't have a vacation in the country because we need to be alone. I get very bothered when we're on holiday and people keep coming to talk business and politics. We enjoy going to places where we are left alone and some countries do respect our desire for privacy, countries like Singapore, Japan, Switzerland and Britain. They know we are there, so they send a note of welcome and tell us to let them know if there's anything we want.”

Malaysian women are much better off compared with their counterparts in many developing nations. But what do they need?

“Women need better jobs and promotions to higher, decision-making positions. This need is across the board for both the public and private sectors. The private sector is moving faster where this is concerned but it is getting better in the Government, too. Now we have women who are director-generals, deputy secretary-generals and there was even a secretary-general before. But we definitely need more.”

peted with my husband. I said no because if he was qualified to do something, he should do it. There's no reason why we should compete even though we are both doctors with the same degree and training. He had his practice and I was in government service.

“You ask me what is the difference between me and (US First Lady) Hillary Clinton. Well, we are of different cultures and have different roles to play. For me, the less involved I am (in politics), the better for me and my husband.”

But even though it was a gentler political scene and promising young leaders were hard to find, Dr Mahathir found himself out of favour in 1969. That year, he lost his seat in the general election and shortly after, was expelled from Umno because of his open criticism of the party leadership.

According to Dr Siti Hasmah, Dr Mahathir took the expulsion quietly.

“I told him that we mustn't have any regrets about it. I thought it was a blessing in disguise; it was good for him and good for the family because for one thing, it allowed us to live in our new home which we had just built. The general election was on May 10 and we had moved in just 10 days before that. We lived there for five years.”

ment and time. I had to give up my state job and continue with a teaching and administrative job with the Public Health Institute. I was always a contract officer so I wouldn't have gained much continuing. I miss delivering babies though."

Thrust into the national political life, Dr Siti Hasmah had to learn quickly what was expected of a Cabinet minister's wife.

"I'm lucky because I find it easy to adjust to any situation. I think I was born with that ability and coming from a big family taught me how to accommodate and relate to people. There are very few people I meet that I can't stand."

Nevertheless, it was a daunting experience but she was not without friends. "I remember (Home Minister) Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie's wife, Khatijah, was the first one to make me feel comfortable," adds Dr Siti Hasmah.

The family would never live in Pondok Maharizan again.

"We finally sold it recently to build the house in (Country Heights) in Kajang. The children hadn't been back there since we moved so my husband decided to sell it. Now they are very upset about it because it was where they grew up."

Seven years later, Dr Mahathir reached the pinnacle of political power when he assumed the mantle as Umno president on June 26, 1981, and two weeks later, became Prime Minister on July 10.

● TURN TO PAGE 4

This was Pondok Maharizan at Batu 6, Titi Gajah, Kota Setar, which Dr Mahathir had designed himself. "It was a nice house and we loved it." It was here that Dr Mahathir wrote his controversial *Malay Dilemma*.

When it was published in 1970, it promptly landed him in hot soup and branded him an ultra-radical Malay nationalist. The book was also banned and it was lifted only when Dr Mahathir became prime minister in 1981.

"The book was actually very straightforward. He was just expressing his views as to what everyone should do for the nation and the community.

"And these were views he had been compiling for years since his university days and in his newspaper column (under his pen name of C.h.e. Det). He had always expressed his nationalistic feelings but this time they were expressed very strongly."

But after five years in the wilderness, Dr Mahathir was re-admitted into Umno in 1972 and his political star began to ascend. He was appointed to several posts and was made a senator. He resumed the weekend KL-Alor Star shuttle until 1974

when the general election was held. This time, he was returned unopposed as the MP for Kubang Pasu.

"When he was appointed Education Minister, the whole family had to finally leave Kedah and move to KL," recalls Dr Siti Hasmah.

Life would never be the same again for the Mahathirs. He had to give up his private practice and she had to give up her own

promising medical career; in the same year - 1974 - she was appointed state maternal and child health officer for Kedah.

"But we had no regrets (making the move). In fact, Mahathir's medical background and practice helped tremendously in his political job, especially in handling problems and people.

"As for me, I had no regrets because my new role required much more commit-

Again, the family was prepared for it because, as Dr Siti Hasmah says, "It started to feel that the inevitable would come after his first appointment as Education Minister in 1974."

The children took their dad's first Cabinet appointment in their stride and weren't particularly impressed. "Big deal!" wrote Marina (who was studying in England) when she was informed.

"My husband became the Deputy Prime Minister in 1976 and from there, what else but the top. The late Tun Hussein Onn chose my husband as his deputy and he himself handed over the reins of government when he couldn't continue because of his health. So it was something expected, I guess.

"The family and I felt proud of the appointment but at the same time, we realised that we would have to share him with the nation."

Throughout his rise to power, Dr Siti Hasmah proved equally adept and comfortable in the role she had to assume. With her warm smile, genuine interest in people and impeccable dressing sense, Dr Siti Hasmah certainly endeared herself more quickly to the people than even the Prime Minister.

"I walk one step, one foot, behind him. If I'm far behind, it's because I walk slowly and he walks very fast," she quips.

But there were difficult events early in the Mahathir administration. For one, there were strong criticism against the high cost of renovating an old colonial bungalow into the official prime minister's residence.

"This used to be the London Tin Mining Company guesthouse. It was a lovely house but before it was renovated it was very dark. We wanted to put up another floor for our living quarters but it crumbled because the foundation was not strong enough.

"And they (the critics) claimed the whole thing cost RM80 million and had a swimming pool and so forth. Well, my husband invited the press to see the 'swimming pool' and what he showed them was the pool for flowers. Even now there's no water in it!

"This house looks big but there isn't even a storeroom and you know how people keep bringing things and gifts. We just have to keep sending them to the (National) Archives to be stored," says Dr Siti Hasmah.

The road to the top

Still, it is a big house for one couple. Fortunately, it is far from empty, thanks to the two youngest children, Mazhar, 12, and Maizura, 11. The five older children and their families also visit very often, almost every day.

Life as the First Family also means being constantly in the limelight and early on, the family members knew they had to

be on guard.

"Right from the beginning, the children were told not to

expect anything from their daddy. They do their own thing but they do sometimes ask for advice because they do not want to do anything which people can object to and which can implicate their father," Dr Siti Hasmah says.

Even then, the family cannot be totally pro-

Dr Siti Hasmah, who was a working mother, talks about parenting then and now:

“ I was with the children, but I do have my regrets. There wasn't much time to be with them; I wasn't there to see them off to school, when they came home and I often wasn't there to help with their homework.

Now with Mazhar and Maizura, I can do all that for them. You can see a difference when mothers stay home. My second daughter, Melinda, is a full-time mother and her two daughters (aged five and eight) are very disciplined and polite. Marina is a working mum but she was at home during the early years of her daughter's life. Now Ineza is an obedient and well brought up child. Imagine, she likes drinking water and isn't mad about Coke and that kind of thing!

Children nowadays are exposed to so many influences and distractions. Before, there was only the TV with very limited viewing hours. Now with 24-hour TV and what-have-you, it's worrying because children are becoming very sophisticated and demanding. But I still feel that women should work if they can get reliable help and can plan their time so that they don't neglect the children. ”

tected nor spared from unsavoury tactics to smear their reputation. During the last general election, for example, Marina was criticised by the Opposition as being too liberal and allegations were made about her drinking liquor. She was stoutly defended by her father.

Shaking her head, Dr Siti Hasmah says: 'I'm used to it. (Such tactics) have been used against my children and myself. There have been nasty remarks passed about me, like I'm not Islamic enough.

When it comes to the thorny and controversial topic of second wives and mistresses, Dr Siti Hasmah is not afraid to speak her mind:

It is important to make men understand that once they hold a title or an important post, they must protect their reputation. If you go out of line, people may not like it. Among men, it may be okay but it's the wives who suffer. I feel it for my friends because I'm a mother to all my ladies, a sort of confidante.

So I try to tell the men, 'Don't get any woman, it's the wife (that counts).' They take the hint.

Do I welcome second wives to my home? It's difficult to welcome the second or third wife if the first wife is a close friend and already with me

in Bakti (Welfare Club of the Wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers) where we only recognise the first one. This is also in our badminton rules and regulations.

How can they (the men) be responsible to the first family when other families start to crop up? Don't we have enough problems affecting children, adolescents and society right now?

Yes, you can have another wife if the first one is medically certified sterile and the husband has been medically certified virile. This is for the sake of having heirs and not for sheer lust. (We) can't have husbands getting doctors to certify their wives as being sterile when they themselves could be the culprit!

"But they are usually anonymous letters so why should I bother with them? I do gladly reply to one or two who write their names and give their addresses. I thank them for their advice and tell them it's what's inside that is important. If you believe in God, you don't have to express it by covering from head to toe, it's what's in your heart.

"Religion has always been part of my life. I pray and fast and I believe in The Almighty. I also believe that if you do good, God will bless you instantly, not next year.

"And to me, all religions are good. Everyone should have a religion, then you know there's someone above guiding you,

granting you things, blessing you. That's very important as our society gets more and more materialistic."

After so many years in the public eye, Dr Siti Hasmah candidly admits that she looks forward to the day when her husband retires.

"There'll be a time for him to retire, he needs to. I look forward to it but it's up to him to tell me when."

And Dr Siti Hasmah laughs when asked if Dr Mahathir will happily potter in the garden at their Country Heights home.

"I'm not too sure of that but knowing my husband, he's not the type to just retire literally and do nothing."

Perhaps a shot at a post in the international arena? After all, rumours were rife not so long ago about Dr Mahathir being nominated for the post of United Nations secretary-general.

Dr Siti Hasmah looks positively horrified at the suggestion of it: "Oh no, no thank you very much. He is not interested and neither am I."

Whatever retirement may hold for them, one can fully expect the couple to be completely happy and comfortable with it, simply because they have each other.

Asked to describe her marriage, Dr Siti Hasmah readily says: "Happy. We certainly don't regret marrying each other. Only

this morning we realised that we've been married 40 years and we asked: how did we tolerate each other for so long?!

"Like any marriage, we have our fights, our ups and downs. But we have many good moments, experiences and we are also blessed with lovely children and grandchildren. One of my happiest moments was to see my newest grandchild, Mirzan's daughter, being born on Jan 13. We named her Khatijah, after my mother.

"I thank God for my husband, for making us meet. It's *jodoh* (fate), they say. But you know, we have to make it work by having trust, patience, appreciation, humility and forgiveness."