

1981 Malaysian of the year



It's been a hectic five-and-a-half months, keeping an eye on the country, getting to know the people better, meeting them in times of happiness . . . or sorrow.

# NEW STYLE ENTERS ON A WHIRLWIND

Bahan asal dari Arkib Neagra Malaysia

HE HAS NEVER been one to pull his punches. The articles he wrote in his student days at the University Malaya, Singapore, reveal the same candour that marks the speeches of Malaysia's Prime Minister today.

Writing of Malay marriages in general, and royal ones in particular, he makes an observation that was particularly bold for the more conservative society of the day: "In Kedah and lately in Kelantan, members of the royal families have to inform the rulers before such marriages (between royalty and non-royalty) take place."

This "was no doubt motivated by a desire to preserve the mythical purity of the royal blood. It is heartening to hear that it has been lifted lately."

Those were the days of the C.H.E. Det articles, the non-de-plume he adopted in his contributions to the Sunday Times in 1949 and 1950. The issues he wrote on then still concern him today: the problems besetting poor farmers and fishermen, injustices in the economy as "development" takes place, Malay customs and their effect on the society — a hint of his "Malay Dilemma" to come.

The difference is that today Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, PM, can do more than just write on these matters.

One of his first activities as PM was the revival of the National and Rural Development Ministry "because the disparity between the rural and urban areas is still wide."

Growing up in Alor Star and later practising medicine there, Dr Mahathir had had first acquaintance with the rural society there. Today he sees rural development as an important aspect of national development, although he has also expressed his disappointment that some rural Malays were becoming pampered and overly dependent on government aid.

The man himself is markedly independent. As Minister of Education in 1974 and Deputy Prime Minister in 1976, he had strenuously prodded Malays to make use of the opportunities given them.

"I have told the Malays that if they want things they have to work for them. Nothing is given free



Riding high on a wave of enthusiasm for a tough, new administration.

in this world — or in the next," he said once in an interview with Newsweek.

Dr Mahathir is also strong on discipline. In August, he introduced the clock-in system in government departments to ensure punctuality, at the same time stressing that this should not make government servants clock watchers. Their priority should be getting the job done, he said.

The fast clip at which the PM pushes himself exemplifies the pace that he expects others to maintain for the sake of administrative efficiency. There was to be "less talk and more work" he announced at the first Cabinet meeting he chaired as PM.

The public has been promised results within a year.

For Dr Mahathir is not merely concerned with the planning and policy making aspects of development; he realises that their implementation is also of paramount importance.

He himself heads the National Action Council, a carryover from the Razak days, which meets once a fortnight to look into the actual application of programmes.

His administrative style has been tough, bureaucratic and efficient. Dr Mahathir has certainly lined up the largest Cabinet

in Malaysian history: all in, a total of 59 ministers, their deputies and Parliamentary Secretaries.

The PM obviously feels that this size is necessary for a country working towards its "economic take-off". Time and again, he has remarked that Malaysia has all the ingredients for such progress, except for good work ethics which he feels is missing in some quarters.

The stances he adopts in international affairs is assured — the mark of a leader confident of his own country's power and influence. Malaysia's Kam-puchean stand and perhaps even more noticeable, its trade position with Britain, both bear the decisive Mahathir stamp.

Dr Mahathir's statements regarding British investments here should not, in any case, have come as a surprise. As Trade and Industry Minister he had exhibited the same repressed anger. "Even their firms which made and still make so much money out of Malaysia will not spend a dollar in helping Malaysian students," he commented once in the face of tuition fee increases in Britain.

It is perhaps a perspective he acquired during colonial times when as a 19-year-old youth, he was one of a group putting up anti-Malayan Union posters during Emergency black-

outs. For this, he was called up for interrogation by the Special Branch.

His strength of conviction in the things he believes has not diminished. Still young in the Cabinet and holding the education portfolio in the mid-70s, Dr Mahathir showed no hesitation in expressing his views succinctly.

He was responsible for gearing schools and universities to using Bahasa Malaysia in line with the Language Policy, the training of temporary teachers, the introduction of the Universities and Colleges Act and the ruling that students going overseas register themselves with the Ministry of Education.

## DIGNIFIED

Such activities were not calculated to endear him with everyone. When he assumed the mantle of leadership, there were fears that he had enjoyed too meteoric a rise to power.

But Dr Mahathir is not really new to politics. As a 20 years old right after the war, he joined various organisations including Umno and in 1964 became MP for Kota Setar Selatan. There was a two-and-a-half year lull in his political career after his fallout with the Tunku in 1969, but he was allowed to rejoin

Umno in 1972 and from then on it was uphill all the way.

The way he carried himself during his fall from favour was characteristic of the man — dignified and never strident. His contemporaries at the University of Malaya, Singapore, remember him as a serious student, a sporting freshman who as a senior was too dignified to indulge in wild ragging.

Today, Dr Mahathir announces his plans for the nation with the same sedate confidence, never allowing himself to be brought down to the level of a good romping debate. The furore over his British announcement and the ruckus over the time-switch and clock-in proposals were met with calm.

The iron fist image that Dr Mahathir has acquired in the public mind is negated by the warm account that his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, gives of him as a family man. She describes him as an "affectionate husband and father" and as a doctor "he had gentle, winning ways with elderly patients."

Contradictory to the quiet confidence he displays today, she remembers him as a shy youth, especially with girls and strangers.

At home Dr Mahathir would be struck with sudden culinary inspirations

headed him then, he recalls.

If Malaysia was not ready to listen to his thoughts and warnings then, it certainly seems to be prepared to accept him now — albeit with occasional reservation, sometimes even trepidation.

The adjectives have changed. "Ultra" has given way to "progressive", "Malay chauvinist" has become "realistic".

Dr Mahathir himself is aware of the labels given him. "If speaking the truth makes one an extremist, I would consider myself a Malay extremist," he told Malaysian Business in a 1976 interview.

"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."

This is the no-holds-barred character of the leader who has astounded the nation with proposal after proposal. The clock-in announcement last August has been followed by a plan to introduce appraisal cards later this year, so that government departments may step up efficiency.

The aim behind both is of course to improve service to the public. The tremors among government circles over the punch card system, however, reverberated in a series of complaints.

In an effort to check against corruption, all top civil servants and members of the Cabinet are now required to declare their assets. More recently, Dr Mahathir also suggested a cut in salary or allowances of Cabinet members.

On the international scene, Dr Mahathir has encouraged a shift away from the traditional centre of the Western world — Britain and U.S. — to a more Eastern world view — Korea and Japan. These shifts will affect the destinations of our students going overseas as well as exchange programmes for training and consultation purposes.

It was Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir who decided to put Peninsular Malaysia in the same time zone as Sabah and Sarawak. The peninsula moved half an hour ahead. Like his hope for 1982 . . . getting ahead.

With these same ideas in mind, he had predicted a race riot in the country just a year before May 1969 occurred. No one had