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# Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir Interview Transcript

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PRIME MINISTER MOHAMAD MAHATHIR: DR. MAHATHIR

CNN'S TALK ASIA HOST LORRAINE HAHN: HAHN

HAHN: Welcome to TALK ASIA. I'm Lorraine Hahn. This week, a rare and exclusive interview with Asia's longest serving leader in office. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has spent two decades as Malaysian Prime Minister. In that time, he has become a living symbol of Malay nationalism and the drive to turn a postcolonial backwater into a success story of independence. Dr. Mahathir is widely criticized and admired for his authoritarian leadership and his resistance to values many Western nations take for granted. In this special edition of TALK ASIA, I'll share the personal conversation we had in Dr. Mahathir's official residence in Putrajaya. I think you'll see a very different side to a man who was originally trained as a family physician, but soon became a fixture in Asia's history books.

Before we look at that conversation, I want to take you back a few months, to the day Dr. Mahathir resigned at the gathering of his party UMNO. It was an extremely emotional moment and took everyone, including his immediate family completely by surprise. Here's a look.

HAHN: When I sat down with Dr. Mahathir, I asked him if he expected that moment to be so emotional.

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, I thought I could have avoided being emotional, but under the circumstances, I suppose I feel, I lost control of myself.

HAHN: Is it out of character for somebody like you?

DR. MAHATHIR: No, it's not out of character. I have been very emotional before, also at the assembly.

HAHN: Were you dreading the moment Prime Minister?

DR. MAHATHIR: I wasn't dreading the moment. I was looking forward to be able to announce my resignation and to step down immediately.

HAHN: I mean, was it planned? When you watch what happened live on television, it seemed that

everybody was dumb founded, including your wife.

DR. MAHATHIR: I didn't tell anybody at all because several times before I have discussed this possible resignation with some of my colleagues and they all said no, no, no you cannot. So, I thought the only way I can do it is to make a public announcement without telling anyone, not even my wife.

HAHN: Why did you do it? What was the straw that broke the camel's back and you said o.k. that's it?

DR. MAHATHIR: No straw at all, nothing. The camel's back was not broken. What happened was that I had meant to step down in 1998, but because of the crisis and also the problem with my Deputy, I had to postpone the resignation which I planned for after the Commonwealth Games. Since then, I have spent time trying to resuscitate the party and I think I've done enough for the party, and it is now back on its old footing. So, I thought it was time for me to step down.

HAHN: Do you think Malaysia can afford losing a gladiator, if I could use that nickname?

DR. MAHATHIR: Malaysia has got all the things in place to continue growth, the policies are there, the mechanisms are there. So, I think even when I am not around, Malaysia can do with other people who are converse with our policies.

HAHN: After you made that shock resignation, how did people close to you react? Was your family taken aback? They said, 'did you know what you did?' What was the reaction?

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, my family accepted it, but the party felt that it was too sudden and they needed more time to adjust and they appealed to me and I had to give in.

HAHN: Are you absolutely positively going to leave?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, absolutely.

HAHN: Cut the umbilical cord?

DR. MAHATHIR: Right.

HAHN: Not taking on the backstage job as Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has done?

DR. MAHATHIR: No, not for me.

HAHN: Why not.

DR. MAHATHIR: Because I just don't think I should be around interfering with things.

HAHN: 57 years, am I correct? In total politics 20 years, two decades, slightly over, at the helm of your country. You must miss something about the job.

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, I miss the job of course. I think I will stay with the Party, I will still work for the Party. I want to ensure that the Party continues to win. So, I will have more time to go down and meet people.

HAHN: But, I mean, it must be difficult to miss the power, miss the control.

DR. MAHATHIR: No, I miss practicing as a doctor, but I put up with it because I have other things to do. So, I don't think I will miss things very much.

HAHN: Datuk Sri Badawi will be your successor. Are there any qualities that you two share?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, we believe in the same thing. We believe in the same methods. Of course the styles will be different, but that is all right.

HAHN: Is that what Malaysia needs, a different style of leader.

DR. MAHATHIR: Perhaps, I think it will be good for people to have a change.

HAHN: Don't you think some may miss having a leader such as yourself? That has put Malaysia effectively on the map, that has stood up for.

DR. MAHATHIR: Some people say they would miss me, but I think people can do without me.

HAHN: Is a legacy that you leave behind, I mean, there are two types of legacies, one obviously the physical legacy, when you see The Petronas Towers, you see the infrastructure, you see the race track and then the more intangible sort of cultural legacy. Which is more important to you?

DR. MAHATHIR: The cultural one is more important. The fact that I was able to maintain the racial harmony between the different peoples in Malaysia, that was more important.

HAHN: Finding a balance between the races.

DR. MAHATHIR: The fact that during the economy turmoil there were no racial clashes which happens in other countries.

HAHN: Was that a challenge for you?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, it was a challenge. When I was first named as Deputy Prime Minister. There was a feeling of shock that I should be chosen because I was labeled as being an ultra and very anti-Chinese.

HAHN: How did you manage to change that perception?

DR. MAHATHIR: Because that was not true. There is nothing to change, it's just a perception promoted by some people who wanted to get rid of me. Practically, they called me an ultra and giving a label to a person is one great way of undermining the person's influence.

HAHN: That's politics though, isn't it?

DR. MAHATHIR: It is politics. I accept that.

HAHN: When we come back, more of my exclusive personal conversation with Mahathir Mohamad, Prime minister of Malaysia, including his days under Japanese occupation.

HAHN: This is TALK ASIA. I want to share with you more of my personal conversation with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Much of Dr. Mahathir's identity was forged during the period of the Japanese military occupation. I asked him, just how much impact that time had on

his life.

DR. MAHATHIR: I think it had a great impact. It proved to me that the British were not invincible. They had promised to protect this country for as long as there are the stars, the moon and the sun, but obviously they didn't, so the Japanese did it to them. So, the idea of invincibility was vanished. From then on I thought we can do what the Japanese have done, that we are also Asians and we can accomplish and govern ourselves.

HAHN: Where those tough times in Malaysia?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes they were tough times because food was not plentiful and we were very poor. All my brothers lost their jobs. We had to resort to selling bananas on the street side and things like that.

HAHN: I was just going to ask you. Is it true that you sold banana fritters or Pisang Goreng?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, I did. I had to earn some money. I can't be always dependant on others. So, I started a small coffee shop and then I went into selling all kinds of things in the local market.

HAHN: So, there was this entrepreneurial flare that was coming up early on.

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, I had to learn how to do business and it was a good exposure for me.

HAHN: Did you ever imagine that you would become Prime Minister of Malaysia?

DR. MAHATHIR: Never because at that time we didn't even think of being independent. I thought the struggle for independence would take a long, and it may only be achieved after I am dead and gone.

HAHN: So, where did this political ambition come from?

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, immediately after the war, the British came back and they decided to make Malaysia a full colony of theirs and not a protected state. And that was very much opposed by Malays and I joined and I was very active among the students, among the young people, getting them to do all kinds of demonstrations, putting up posters and things like that. So, I became involved in politics.

HAHN: How did you juggle being a practicing physician and at the same time delving into politics? How do you juggle that?

DR. MAHATHIR: Not much juggling really. Being a medical practitioner enables me to get in touch with people, understand their problems, feel sympathetic towards them and the natural thing is to want to help them and if you become a politician and if you are successful, you can help them even more.

HAHN: When did you realize you had to give up your practice in order to focus strictly on politics?

DR. MAHATHIR: I was able to continue with my medical practice while I was Member of Parliament. But when I was appointed Minister of Education in 1974 I had to give up my practice because that is requirement. So, there is no problem there. I gave up medicine because I thought being a Minister gives me more opportunities to deal with more people.

HAHN: Would you consider yourself a typical Malay?

DR. MAHATHIR: Perhaps not quite typical because I have a tendency to reject any values, even the Malay values, which prevent me from achieving the things I would like to achieve.

HAHN: Give me an example.

DR. MAHATHIR: I work harder than most people. I work very hard indeed. See, I work day and night.

HAHN: Where did that come from?

DR. MAHATHIR: As a doctor you are out on call most nights, so you don't get continuous sleep and that becomes something that is familiar to you. So, working hard doesn't bother me.

HAHN: If you are not a typical Malay, what are the inherit qualities of a Malay?

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, they are working hard now, but they are not working hard enough. And they like shortcuts and they like to achieve things overnight. And they don't look too far into their future. They live as they say in Malay, there are "earning in the morning for the morning, earning in the evening for the evening". That is their saying. And this is not good for them. They have to plan for the future.

HAHN: On a more personal note, I understand that your father was one of the first Malay headmaster at an English language school. Was he tough on you?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes he was tough on me...we were afraid of him. When he comes home and we hear his coughs as he arrives we all run to our books to study.

HAHN: So home was almost like school?

DR. MAHATHIR: Almost like school-perhaps more than school.

HAHN: Are there any comparisons that you can draw between let's say your father's relationship with you, and your relationship with your country?

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, I think so. There is that he's pushing me I think because he loved me. So the way I push the country is because I love the country.

HAHN: What about your mother? Not too much is written about her. What did she teach you?

DR. MAHATHIR: No but she has great influence on me too on the need to be humble. On the need to be friendly with people, to try and to accommodate and things like that. If I get into a quarrel my mother invariably blames me never somebody else.

HAHN: So it was like a balance between a very strict father and a very understanding mother.

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, I was much more close to her.

HAHN: When we come back, we'll hear about another woman Dr. Mahathir is very close to.

HAHN: This is TALK ASIA. Some more now of my conversation with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia. You know, Dr. Mahathir had a nickname growing up. Members of his family would call him "Che Det". The title 'Che', is a Malay title for young people. And "Det" is an abbreviation of his name.

Later on when Dr. Mahathir would write for student publications he would use the pen name 'C-H-E Det.' When we talked recently in Putrajaya, I asked Dr. Mahathir does anyone else, still call him 'Che Det'.

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes, in my family. The older members in my family still call me that and in Kedah, when I go home there are friends who call me that.

HAHN: When you have big issues you need to think about, who do you seek advice from?

DR. MAHATHIR: I talk to everybody obliquely, I don't really indicate what I want from them. And in the end I make my own decision.

HAHN: But do you have like an inner circle, it may be family as well not excluding that somebody that you can really say 'I'm really worried about this issue...what do you think'?

DR. MAHATHIR: No, I don't really open up to people. I think I keep things to myself.

HAHN: Why, is that a question of trust?

DR. MAHATHIR: Well it's not a question of trust-but I think by listening to people, by thinking deeply, I feel I can reach a conclusion. But if I listen to people all the time some people might have too much influence.

HAHN: So you might get jaded.

DR. MAHATHIR: Yes.

HAHN: Do you have a mentor at any time in your life?

DR. MAHATHIR: I can't remember having one.

HAHN: Let me talk about your wife, how did you two meet?

DR. MAHATHIR: We went to medical college together, same year. She was the only lady Malay medical student, and slowly we got to know each other.

HAHN: So wasn't love at first sight?

DR. MAHATHIR: Oh no...I don't think so!

HAHN: When you think about yourself as a young gentleman dating your wife...or your girlfriend at that time, were you romantic? Did you sweep her off her feet? I mean, what type of a young man were you?

DR. MAHATHIR: No, I think we quarreled a lot. We get on...but we have differences. We quarrel sometimes, and then we make up.

HAHN: That's a form of communication I'm told.

DR. MAHATHIR: I suppose so.

HAHN: Behind every successful man is a woman, would you agree?

DR. MAHATHIR: Well my wife would say behind every successful man, is a wife.

HAHN: Would you agree?

DR. MAHATHIR: I have to.

HAHN: What sort of support has she given you through the years that really meant something to you? Aside from being just your wife.

DR. MAHATHIR: Well, the fact that I can go back to my own house with my wife and my family. That is ample support for me.

HAHN: She raised seven children.

DR. MAHATHIR: I would like to say "we" raised, seven children

HAHN: What do you think is the secret to your successful marriage?

DR. MAHATHIR: I think tolerance and the fact that we have to live together I think we have to learn to tolerate each other. And forget and forgive, compromise sometimes like everybody else.

HAHN: We all know you are boss of your country. Are you boss at home?

DR. MAHATHIR: No, no, no. I'm not boss at home. There're certain things I don't dictate.

HAHN: Like what?

DR. MAHATHIR: Sometimes I'm required to attend certain functions, and I'm told I should attend. I do.

HAHN: What about with your grandchildren?

DR. MAHATHIR: The same I suppose, as all grandparents, I love my grandchildren, and they get along with me when I'm around.

HAHN: In terms of the Muslim faith, how do you teach your children to be good Muslims?

DR. MAHATHIR: Very earlier on, they're taught all the elements of the things they have to do, and also basic understanding of the faith. We get teachers to teach them. And we also try by examples.

HAHN: You are 76 going on to 77, obviously looking at you would never guessed that. How do you stay so fit?

DR. MAHATHIR: That is a question many people ask me. I think by moderation, I don't eat too

much. I try to get enough sleep in a day, at least six hours at least if I can. I think having an interesting life is very important. Passion for work.

HAHN: Soon you'll have quite a bit more time on your hands. What are you planning to do?

DR. MAHATHIR: I haven't planned anything yet. I think I will do some writing, I have to record some of my things, some of my observations

HAHN: So would that mean an autobiography?

DR. MAHATHIR: It could become an autobiography, but obviously there may be something that I have done which is worthy of recording and maybe others might find them useful.

HAHN: You horse ride. You are pretty outgoing person. Is that something you are going to do more often. Sailing I heard that you've taken up sailing.

DR. MAHATHIR: I hope so. I hope I can ride horses more often. Now I can ride only once a week. Sailing. I don't go sailing on my own, but I go on cruises in small boats.

HAHN: In Malaysia?

DR. MAHATHIR: In Malaysia, in the Mediterranean sometimes. In the Caribbean when I have opportunity.

HAHN: So there would be no way that you would return to politics or stay on in your position. You could not see a scenario which could make you stay on as Prime Minister?

DR. MAHATHIR: No. But I will certainly be involved in politics because I am going to go around and explain the whole idea of Malaysia and its politics and why it should be a democracy, and how you should go about developing the country.

HAHN: And I'm sure a lot of people, will listen. And that concludes this very special edition of Talk Asia with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Drop me a note at CNN.com. I'm Lorraine Hahn. Let's talk again, next week.

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