

Sixty Minutes with Mahathir

Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad might have relinquished the country's ultimate seat of power after 22 long years. But he is still in huge demand from around the world, so much so that INSPIRE had to wait ten long months to secure just sixty minutes of his time, during which he was alternately solemn, poker-faced, provocative and teary-eyed.

During the session mediated by INSPIRE editor, Dato' Dr. Nellie Tan-Wong and Dato' Napsiah Omar, Mahathir was full of witty banter and insights on diverse subjects, reflecting his multifaceted personality and magnetism. Apparently, his quickness isn't confined to the art of conversation. Even on the dance floor, the sprightly ex-premier oozes charm, pulling off a graceful Malay dance as well as rhythmic disco moves at a royal banquet, recalls Tan-Wong, who classes his adaptability as the hallmark of a "true entrepreneur, who has to be an all-rounder, applying the push-and-pull business strategy and always attracting attention with his charisma."

Inspire: *When you took over as Prime Minister, you were a medical doctor in the wake of three lawyers. Some people thought you would be more diagnostic in your management approach. What drives your management style?*

Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed: If you want to get well, you have to do things which are unpleasant and unpopular. In any case, anything you do will be criticised. I applied some medical methods, in that I tried to treat the disease instead of just the symptoms. Given enough time, you will see results.

Inspire: *How successful was your "Bersih,*



Cekap, Amanah" campaign?

TDM: It succeeded to a certain extent but corruption cannot be eradicated completely. There are two kinds: above the table and under the table. The first stage is hidden but if it's allowed to carry on, it becomes acceptable — "above the table." We don't want to get to the stage where,

"If you want to get well, you have to do things which are unpleasant and unpopular. In any case, anything you do will be criticised. I applied some medical methods, in that I tried to treat the disease instead of just the symptoms. Given enough time, you will see results."

like in the US, you have to pay lobbyists to push your agenda in Government. The people have direct access to Government in Malaysia, and the incidence of corruption has declined. It's just not publicised so much because this kind of work has to be done quietly to be effective.

Inspire: *Your Look East Policy has been criticised as not being the best, based on*



the Japanese experience. How would you respond to this?

TDM: In Japan, employers provide lifetime employment, and workers are cared for. But in Malaysia, workers need to understand that when they resort to industrial action, the industries are threatened. We want to create jobs so that

employers will scramble to get workers.

Inspire: *What success did you achieve in the input of Islamic values and practices?*

TDM: Muslims apply different perspectives and different values but we find these very compatible with the good values that are inherent in other religions and faiths. When we adopted Islamic values, it wasn't at the expense of other faiths. It was good

for everybody because it is about honesty, and it has made people more conscious about good practices, good values and how they should perform.

Inspire: *How do you envisage the moulding of a pluralistic society to create a 'Bangsa Malaysia'?*

TDM: At first we thought (like the US) that we should assimilate into the majority indigenous group but that was not acceptable. So we looked at integrating instead. Each ethnic community retains



their own culture, language and values system. But there are still extremist groups who do not want to do that. On the whole, we haven't done too badly.

Inspire: *Do you think it is right to create residential colleges with a 100 per cent Malay population? Is it going in the right direction to have overseas scholarships exclusively for Malays, compared to the situation in local universities where all ethnic communities mix?*

TDM: That was not Government policy. That was the work of people with their own agenda. But in local universities, the Malays do not want to stay in the same hostels with the Chinese. There are other forces at work that perpetuate this situation. The same happens abroad. When Malay students are given allowances to cover their rent, they prefer to stay with other Malays — some even insist on staying with people from their own state! These things need to be overcome, which is one of the reasons for National Service. We have to try (to

become more tolerant and united).

Inspire: *Are there different management styles between Asian and Western countries?*

TDM: Yes, but the styles are slowly converging. The Chinese used to have mainly family-run businesses but there is an increase of public limited companies now, which is a much better proposition because they can become better organised and more transparent. To a certain extent, they have to follow Western management principles.



The importance of shareholders seems to be diminishing; the CEO has grown more powerful. It's come to the point where the CEO behaves as if he owns the company. It's the CEOs today who are pushing for globalisation because they have more to gain. Even if they fail, they get not a golden handshake, but a golden parachute!

"The CEO has grown more powerful. It's come to the point where the CEO behaves as if he owns the company. It's the CEOs today who are pushing for globalisation because they have more to gain. Even if they fail, they get not a golden handshake, but a golden parachute!"

Inspire: *As the prime minister, you had to manage the country. How did you manage differently from a Western manager?*

TDM: In the first place, you have to think less of your self. Don't think about compensation. I wanted to see that the things I set out to do got done. The satisfaction was from results; compensation was secondary.

Inspire: *Are you satisfied with the management of Government-owned companies? Are you satisfied with their performance?*

TDM: By and large, I am not dissatisfied, but some have done better than others — PETRONAS, for example. Some are always asking for more funds from the Government. Although the private sector is much more efficient, you do need the public sector in some instances.

Inspire: *During your premiership, you*



took the bold step of pegging the Ringgit to the US Dollar. Can you share with us your reasons and instincts for taking this step? What convinced you?

TDM: We are an independent country, and proud of it. We should not submit to anyone. The IMF proposal meant that

we had to accede to the demands of certain countries, which in effect allowed Malaysia to be managed by other countries. We could not accept that. We studied the effects of their recommendations and decided we could not afford to take the IMF recommendations. We also studied two countries — China and Argentina — which were in similar situations.

China had pegged its renminbi and disallowed its trading. Argentina had pegged its peso at 1 peso to US\$1 and was suffering. At that time, Singapore was offering higher interest rates and we had to stem the flow of funds out of the country. We were becoming poorer, and we needed to prevent the dumping of shares. It wasn't easy to make a decision. Not all the advisors could agree on the course of action either.

Inspire: *You have observed the development of women's leadership over the past 22 years of your premiership. You are aware of the large intake of female students in Malaysian universities; you have seen Malaysian women taking up high and unusual positions in space research, the United Nations, in invention and other forms of research. How do you envisage the leadership of Malaysian women in the next ten years? Is it possible that we will have a female Malaysian Chief Justice, a female university vice-chancellor, mayor, governor, Menteri Besar, Chief Minister or even Prime Minister? Or is this just wishful thinking?*

TDM: It's not wishful thinking, but it'll take more than ten years! It's not that women are not qualified — they are very qualified; unfortunately, Malaysian society is still very male-oriented. Although it is women who win the election (for the candidates), the men still think it is their right to run the country. I have often criticised Malay men in particular for being lazy. In Kelantan, it is the women who work, while the men sit in coffeeshops, talking about politics!

I've said it openly, not because I've needed women's support but because it really annoys me, this attitude — among the Malays in particular — that the men should reap the harvest although it is the women who plant the rice. I don't know what the men are doing, but they're certainly not working. One of the reasons we won the last elections was because we had the Wanita and Puteri wings. Between the two of them, they won us huge support.

Inspire: *The political reality in Malaysia is such that it suppresses women's participation in the respective parties. What is your opinion?*

TDM: Women attend branch and division meetings, but when it comes to voting, they vote in the men! They tend not to assert themselves, but if they want to, they can. If they turn out in full force, they can vote themselves in.

Inspire: *Why does it appear that PAS has been more successful in attracting more professionals than UMNO?*

TDM: Professionals go to PAS because they cannot find a place in UMNO. The Ketua Bahagian (Division Head) doesn't want to be challenged. Those professionals who choose UMNO over PAS see UMNO as the party that is going to win and give them perks.

Inspire: *Do you envisage more political parties in the future?*

“... unfortunately Malaysian society is still very male-oriented ... the men still think it is their right to run the country. I have often criticised Malay men in particular for being lazy. In Kelantan, it is the women who work, while the men sit in coffeeshops, talking about politics!”

TDM: Yes, but they will be one-issue parties. You should go into politics because you want to make a difference, not because you want to make a profit.

Inspire: *You've brought Malaysia to the international stage with events like the OIC, APEC, the Commonwealth Games; you've created projects like the MSC, KLIA, the Petronas Twin Towers, the Sepang F1 Circuit etc. How have these projects benefited Malaysia besides bringing in the tourist dollar? Were there gains in political networking, training, diplomacy, advancement in sports etc?*

TDM: These were things we could afford. We didn't borrow money for them. If we did not know how to manage our money, we wouldn't have done them. If you want to do something, do it for posterity. Think of the next generation. Putrajaya is an example. The mentality is (to build) for the long term. These things help project the right image of the country.

Most people who come to Malaysia re-

member KLIA, and the Twin Towers. For three days every year, Malaysia becomes the focus of the world during the F1 race. If you crunch the numbers, it is profitable for Malaysia; a way of getting attention for the country at the least cost, both directly and indirectly through spin-offs.

Inspire: *Looking back over your premiership, with hindsight, would you have done anything differently? What are some of your proudest moments? Regrets? What makes you smile, and what makes you scowl?*

TDM: I don't think I'd do things differently. What I feel is that I didn't do nearly enough. What I wanted to do was change the culture of Malaysians. It is the culture which determines whether you are successful or not. If you have the wrong

value system, you will fail. I did not succeed in changing the culture. But I smile because some people changed — there are successful Bumiputras.

When I became Prime Minister, the Chinese community was wary because I was known for my pro-Malay stance — as an ultra-Malay — but when I stepped down, they were very supportive. In fact, in 1999, they were so supportive that we managed to get 75 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

Well, one of the moments I appreciated was when I was doing my own shopping, some young Chinese girls came up to me and said, “Thank you.” I asked them why? (*poignant pause, almost moved to tears*) “For being our friend and for all you have done.” And that I think is worth all the 22 years of working with a low pay (*laughter*).

If there is anything I feel I can be proud of achieving, it is winning the support of all communities, including the Chinese, for the Malay ultra! **I**