

**Mahathir and Najib - of leaders and listeners**  
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COMMENT During a laid-back conversation over lunch, a man who has rubbed shoulders with almost everyone in the corridors of power for the better part of the last two decades was eager to share with me a snippet about former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

This story, which I do my best narrate here, might not be exactly accurate but offers an insight of what leaders are made of.

Apparently, at about 2am on a Tuesday morning sometime in the late 90s, Mahathir (left) pulled up unannounced at the site of a government-funded construction in Kuala Lumpur, accompanied by only one bodyguard. He asked the site supervisor where the safety helmets were, helped himself to one, and then asked those in charge how many floors were being constructed.

"Seven floors, Datuk Seri," came the answer.

Mahathir wanted to view all the seven floors, and the supervisor showed him the lift.

"No, let's walk," Mahathir supposedly said, and he proceeded to walk up to inspect each and every floor. By the time he was on the fifth floor, half of the engineers accompanying him could not keep up. (One of them apparently started jogging the following day in order to improve his fitness.)

Mahathir trudged to the seventh floor, and did not like the tiles that were installed on the walls. He asked the engineers and architects if this could be changed.

"Anything for you sir."

Mahathir had no time for sweet words. How long, he asked.

"A week," came a confident answer.

"Are you sure?" Mahathir asked watchfully, even reminding him that it was a Tuesday morning, just past 2am. Everyone nodded their heads.

Flowers, too

Exactly one week later, at just past 2am, Mahathir turned up at the same construction site, picked up a safety helmet on his own, and made his way up seven floors without as much as greeting anyone.

He went straight for the tiles and saw that the job was incomplete. The person who made the then-prime minister of Malaysia this promise was soon without a job, I was told.

This, mind you, is not the first time I have heard such stories about Mahathir's knack for "spot-checks". He once, according to another anecdote, was taking a walk in Putrajaya touring his dream pet project when he noticed something on the pavement of a main road where there were no buildings nearby.

"Why is that flower here? I did not order that flower. I ordered a different flower to be placed here," he said. It is needless to say what supposedly happened to the contractor after that.

I, like many contemporary Malaysians, am not a fan of Mahathir's ideas and policies that have delivered both economic progress but at the same time stifled the intellectual progress of Malaysians and Malaysia as a unified society.

But, at times, you can't help but acknowledge the leadership traits that have been exhibited in these stories. It is because this generation of Malaysians has seen nothing but weak, indecisive leadership.

No questions, please

Now let's compare all those little stories to that of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. In a press conference that he chaired recently, Najib noticed that there were hordes of journalists with their pens at the ready, and their instincts prowling for a moment to ask him questions.

"Sorry, I have to rush, I cannot take questions," he said. "I know you are all yearning to ask me plenty of questions."

A part of me wanted to jump and shout: "Then answer, it's your duty!"

But then again, it's not like he was ever ready to face the questions. This was the man who said a Boeing 777 had "ended" in the southern Indian Ocean without specifying what he meant. This was the man who speaks like a moderate here and an extremist 50 miles away.

This, was also the man who was vexed with comments from readers and commentators that he decided to sue Malaysiakini for defamation. This was also the man who allows his inspector-general of police, attorney-general, and home minister to make their own interpretations of the law.

For mere child custody cases (I'm pretty sure child custody can't possibly be the most pertinent case to be discussed in constitutional courts), this man suggested that Federal Court fast track and expedite cases to be heard there.

All the while the person in the highest office in Putrajaya continues twiddling thumbs, sending statements via a "government spokesperson" once in a blue moon.

The statements are apologetic, evasive, and unclear. It is more akin to saying nothing at all.

In between selfies

In the midst of all that foreign diplomacies, the regular selfies, and sharing of irrelevant, light-heartedness of daily life, Najib seems oblivious to the tension on the ground - be it politically, religiously, or racially motivated.

Does he pretend to turn a deaf ear or he is indeed deaf to the voices of frustration?

Or maybe he just does not have the answers to the questions?

But pretending the question isn't staring you at the face, and not talking about it does not solve the problem, does it?

Probably, very probably, he is as oblivious as he looks and sounds.

While Mahathir takes that walk up those seven floors to check on those tiles, Najib is the leader who will stop and ask the contractor if the tiles have been fixed.

The contractor says yes, and satisfied, the leader walks away. Sitting in his office, that is probably how he treats his cabinet ministers.

"Can you handle this? Everything is okay?"

"Yes," would be the answer.

"Is our support base growing?" he might ask.

"Yes. Definitely," someone would answer.

Not short of advice

With a bloated list of eight advisers and 10 ministers under his department, Najib is probably not short on advice.

But put the same answers in front of someone like Mahathir and you probably be demanded to show proof, results and so much more before your answer can even be qualified as an answer worth relying on.

Of course, Mahathir might not be the best example to follow, but in the Malaysian context, it does tell you a lot when those close to the corridors of power admire Mahathir's prowess more and more with every passing day Najib continues in the office of PM.

When Najib displays this kind of leadership, for a lack of better example, Mahathir's approach and logic becomes crystal clear to those involved in politics.

When you see Mahathir walk into a meeting room, 10 years after letting go of the premiership, and still command a pin-drop silence from everyone, it becomes clear what kind of leadership Najib practices.

Lazy leadership.

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