

Siti Hasmah on batik vs bling-bling
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INTERVIEW The wives of prominent men in Malaysia are known for their love affair with batik.

So is not surprising Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, wife to the longest-serving prime minister in Malaysian history, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has an obsession with batik.

Yet, Siti Hasmah still stands out from the rest. She prefers simple but tasteful dressing, without being over-the-top.

Her attitude, however, could be a result of Mahathir's 'criticism', the fourth Malaysian prime minister who apparently cared a great deal about the personal appearances of his family members when in public.

"Maybe because if he (Mahathir) sees someone who dresses very well but his wife is sloppy, then the wife should be advised.

"My lipstick or something doesn't have to be too red, my hair properly done but not too over. No bling-bling," she said with a warm laugh.

Elaborating on 'bling-bling' clothing, Siti Hasmah said in this easy-going interview with Malaysiakini that she indeed did get the chance to wear such clothing to certain functions.

"Occasionally, especially when he (Mahathir) was prime minister and we go to the palace and so forth, that is the time you can bling-bling a lot.

"The queen, especially during Johor's time, will give instructions for all to wear bling-bling," she said, smiling impishly.

Doesn't go for 'datin image'

During the interview at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya on Monday, Siti Hasmah wore a maroon red baju kurung with a modern batik motif.

Not conforming to the 'datin image' of gold bracelets and diamond rings, Mahathir's wife is more comfortable decked out in pearl necklaces.

She even shared a tip - pearls are much easier to match.

"I don't wear bling-bling, I wear pearls. Pearls are safer. Ladies, please remember this. Pearls are the easiest, nicest, the most appropriate and it suits any colour of your clothes," she said while showing the pearl jewellery she was wearing.

One gets the feeling, in speaking to Siti Hasmah, that she was completely at ease talking about her interest in batik and how it proudly symbolises the Malaysian identity.

In fact, she loves wearing batik clothing when she is abroad.

"When I go overseas, I'm only clad in batik. (It is like) a standing order for me and for all minister's wives who go overseas to wear batik," she quipped.

'Pretty Yen Yen' in batik

Reflecting on the past, Siti Hasmah recalled one time when 40 Umno women and herself attended a glam United Nations event wearing batik clothing, attracting the attention of all the world leaders present.

"Everyone was shocked to see all that batik. People were surprised we had such good clothing fashion," she added.

However, even though batik is usually associated with the image of the Malay woman, she said batik can now be used for all kinds of clothing, including incorporating it with other ethnic fashion.

"For Chinese ladies, just look at (Ng) Yen Yen - can wear Chinese collar (cheong sam) with the batik cloth, so pretty," Siti Hasmah said, praising the former MCA cabinet minister's dress sense.

In the end though, Siti Hasmah revealed the most important thing she looks for in her clothing was comfort.

It might not be a well-known fact but because of this, while she was working as a doctor during the first few years of the country's independence, she fought for female nurses to be able to wear long pants instead of the knee-length skirt that was the norm then.

"When they're delivering babies ... they had to use a sarong to cover their knees. (Same thing happened) when they are bathing the babies and so forth.

"So eventually they allowed (long pants) because they realised that nurses must wear pants," she said.

Siti Hasmah is the first Malay woman to qualify as a medical doctor.

She started her medical career in Kedah, the birth place of her husband where Mahathir - also popularly known as 'Doctor Umno' - opened the first Malay clinic in Alor Setar.