

Made for Prominence

Businessman-cum-politician Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir talks about his life in politics thus far and his future plans.

■ By Habhajan Singh

MIDWAY through Umno Youth's monthly executive council meeting, Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir excused himself and walked across to an ongoing conference on criminalising war.

As Mukhriz stood at the entrance of the conference hall on that afternoon on Feb 6, a full house was intently listening to Ali Shalah, the 'prisoner in the hood' victim of American atrocities in Abu Ghraib. While in prison, he was electrocuted more than once, each time lasting a few minutes, Shalah told the conference organised by the Perdana Global Peace Organisation (PGPO).

Mukhriz and two other speakers were slated to speak next. Engaging the audience after Shalah's emotional roller-coaster ride would be quite a challenge. But Mukhriz managed to rise to the occasion, sharing his thoughts on Muslim youths' perspective on war crimes.

As PGPO's executive director, the three-day conference starting on Feb 5 was a hectic affair. But Mukhriz was clearly in his element, though the presence of his father, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, loomed large.

'We often take for granted the peace and harmony we have in Malaysia. We have this culture of just *cari makan* (earning your livelihood) and continuing with our daily lives (ignoring other important issues). Perhaps, we must teach peace in schools.

We need to learn about peace, too,' he told the audience at the question-and-answer session later.

Mukhriz, who heads Umno Youth's international bureau, believes Malaysians are most suited to talk about peace due to their track record in maintaining racial harmony.

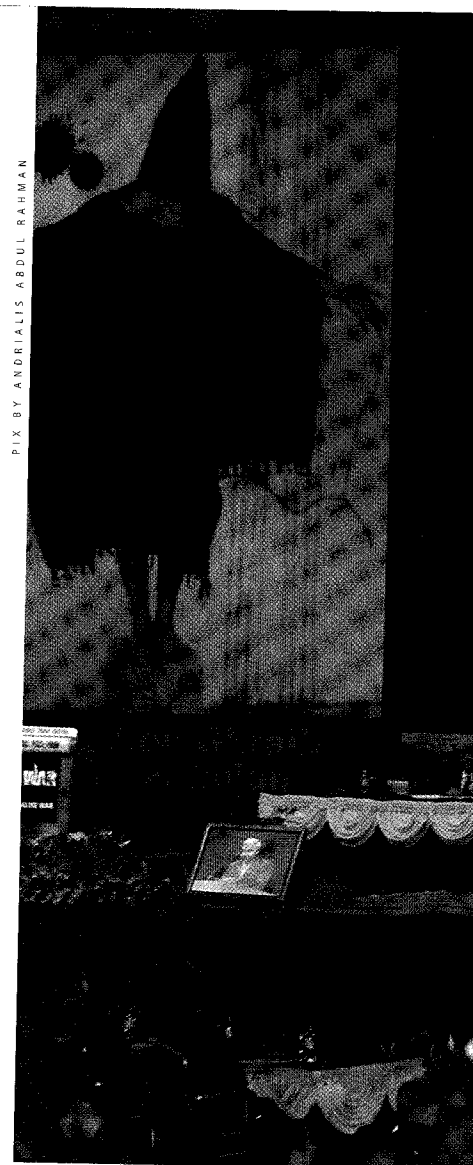
'Some tell us you are a flash point, you are just waiting to explode. They've been talking for 20 years and we've not exploded,' he says.

Just days before the conference, *Malaysian Business* caught up with the 43-year-old for an interview. Excerpts:

Tell us about your political career path?

It is not as I had expected. In hindsight, I realise I might have taken some things for granted. Now, when I think about it, they were obviously wrong. You see, I was close to the party president for 22 years. I thought that when I got into politics, I could make use of that knowledge. Then I realised it was a wrong assumption because your whole worldview of Umno politics comes from the perspective of the highest-ranking official in the party (former Prime Minister and Umno President Dr Mahathir). Here, decisions are made based on authority of that level, and you could do things the way you wanted.

I should have realised early on that I was coming in from the lower ground. The view at branch and division level is very different



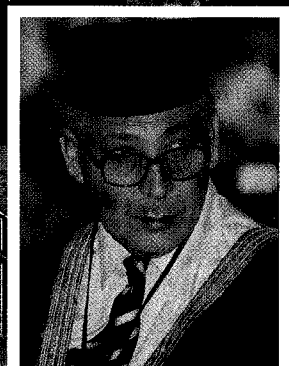
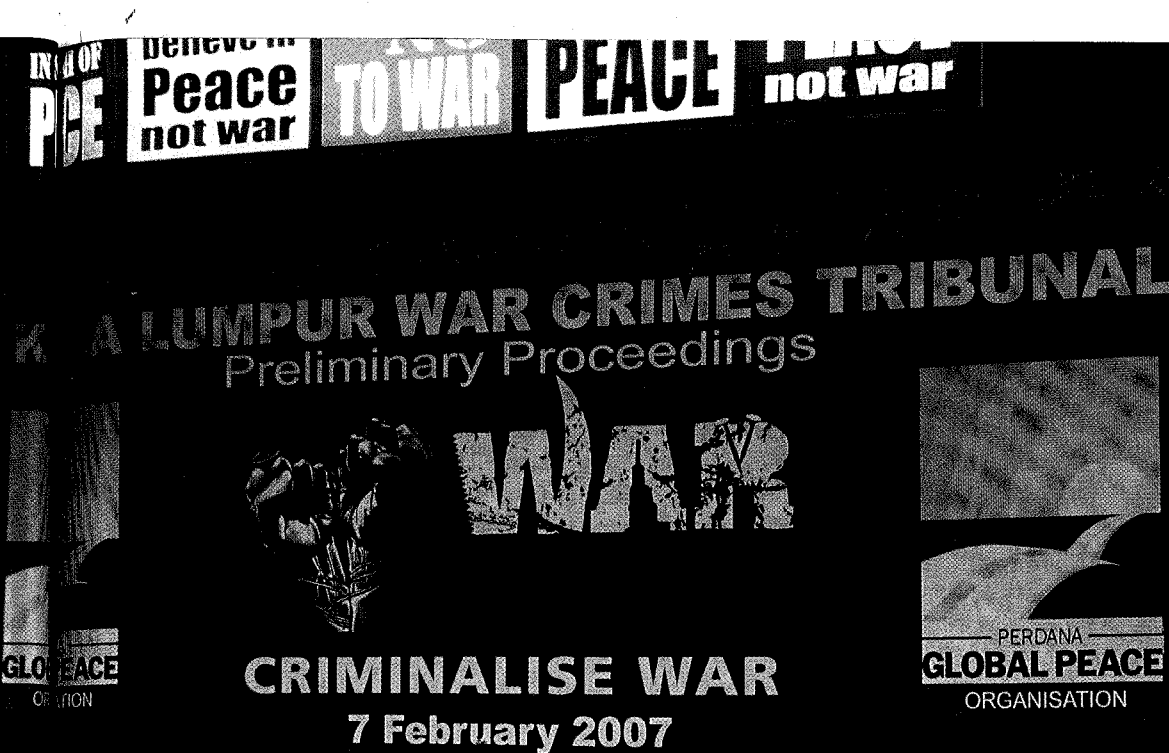
PIX BY ANDRIALIS ABDUL RAHMAN

from that of the Federal level.

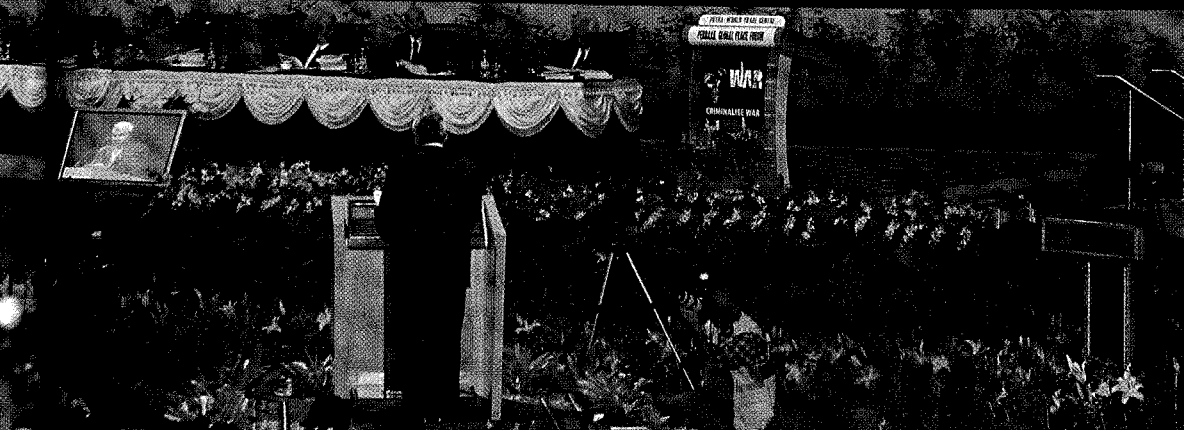
But I might say that I did not get in with my eyes shut. I wanted to contest for every post I was interested in, knowing fully well that I could lose. But I felt it was a necessary rite of passage. Sure enough, I lost my first contest as Umno Youth head in 2004 but won two positions subsequently.

You've said in previous interviews that Dr Mahathir restricted you from participating in the political process. Do you wish you had started earlier?

Yes, but it was not out of choice that I started this late. While father was still party president, I knew he would not endorse or bless any political debut on my part. He's sensitive about accusations of nepotism. On the other hand, I was somewhat lucky that the year he left (as Prime Minister) in 2003, I still had one year left to contest for a position in Umno Youth. I was then 39, the limit is 40.



GOOD SHOW: Perdana Global Peace Organisation's conference on criminalising war and (inset) Ali Shalah, seen without the hood (see top left pix) that shocked the world for its sheer cruelty



How do you spend most of your time nowadays? Which component of your work takes the largest piece of the cake?

It's Umno Youth. Prior to that, it was Ansara (ex-Mara Students Association). To some extent, I feel I have neglected Ansara. That's where I came from. As Ansara president, we got to do a lot of things, including Peace Malaysia. Now that I'm in Umno Youth directly, I know some friends feel that I have placed Ansara in the back seat. I'm trying to rectify that.

On the corporate scene, I'm spending less and less time running my business. I've been a businessman, on my own accord, for 12 years. As and when necessary, I have to pay some attention to it. I still do but increasingly less.

Mukhriz (standing) with dad Dr Mahathir: If one is in politics, you must have ambitions

What's next in your career?

I'll continue to work to strengthen Umno. This includes Umno's relevance and appeal to the Malay ethnic group. Where there are weaknesses, I hope to make an impact to bring about change. One example is the way Umno handles differences of opinion within the party, especially when it reflects the sentiment on the ground. It is healthy for Umno to be able to accept differing viewpoints without jeopardising or questioning one's loyalty to the party. An example of that happened last November (during the Umno Annual General Assembly). I made a personal comment (on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speech), but it was blown out of proportion and got a little bit out of hand.

Interestingly enough, when I went to see the PM, who is also the party president, on Dec 12, I asked for his advice on how I should conduct myself politically from here on. He advised me to stay true to myself. I then told

him that if I were to be true to myself, there may be instances where my viewpoint would differ or even be in conflict with his. To that, he said that's to be expected of Umno Youth. It would seem to me that he can accept differences of opinion and that he does not see this as some kind of dissent or, worse still, a sign of disloyalty.

If that is the case, then how do you explain the barrage of criticism levelled at you following the mild criticism of the party president?

Perhaps, in their enthusiasm or eagerness to be seen as defending or championing the top leadership, they went overboard in their criticism of me. What I had said was in no way intended to insult the leadership.

In hindsight, considering what Abdullah had told you, how will you react in the future?

I think it will be detrimental to Umno if its own members are not allowed to speak out. I would rather listen to different viewpoints from within Umno rather than outside. I don't need to wait until the Opposition brings it up.

But do you see it happening under the present leadership?

Not enough of it. Somehow, there seems to be, I won't say a lack, but not enough debate internally about important issues. It's as if decisions can only be made at the very top, with the rest having no impact at all, the views of the rest of us having no significance at all.

This is not healthy, as the branch and divisions truly represent the grass roots. Concerns and grievances are felt immediately at that level. Umno has always prided itself with this network as being effective in disseminating information and collecting data points from all levels. It's a huge network. I don't think any other party has it. We can quickly assess the feelings of the people and based on that make the right decision. If we do not make use of it, then we become disconnected and disjointed from the electorate.

What are your views on race relations in Malaysia? There have been suggestions that it is at the lowest ebb at the moment.

On the one hand, the Malays,

economically, are still behind. That certain special attention needs to be continuously given by the Government in order that the objective is realised: the vision of eradicating poverty and separate distinction on economic standing, race and ethnicity.

On the other hand, I don't think it's mutually exclusive: do the first by discriminating the rest.

The NEP (New Economic Policy) talks about growing the pie. From growth, you distribute. We have never adhered to the Robin Hood style: taking from the rich and giving it to the poor. We've always focused on growing the economy in general and then looking at the delivery system to ensure equitable distribution.

So far, we have succeeded. May 13 (racial riots) has never happened again since 1969. In the 1997/98 Asian crisis, we did not end up like some neighbours where we saw riots with retail stores being broken into, consumer items being stolen. That's testimony of a successful government policy in economic development.

Are you concerned with the race relation situation in the country at present?

Sure. I'm very concerned, as there seems to be more polarisation. I believe politics has got a direct link to economics. If everyone is happy economically, then the politics follows suit. This is a clear example of how economic uncertainty plays on the fears of the people. It further polarises people, emphasises differences.

Some are concerned with what they see, an over-emphasis on Islamisation in so many things Malaysian, including education.

We've always been proud of our diversity. We used to be called a melting pot of cultures, religions. That makes us stand out from the rest. We need to look at our advantage of being a melting pot.

During my secondary schooling at MSRM, this process of Islamisation of MARA schools was already happening to the extent, at one point, that girls could not mix with boys. Some of the new colleges actually had separate dining halls, because girls could not sit with the boys. On the few occasions where the boys and girls had group discussions, they were separated by a white board. This was really

getting out of hand. I didn't see how that was helping us mould the kind of character in the young to be prepared for the real world, first in Malaysia, then outside Malaysia. Worse still if they have to compete with foreigners.

We are doing a disservice to the youth if we do not provide them with the kind of education that prepares them to compete in the real world.

Looking at it from the political angle, when they realise the real world is not to their liking, they may use their power to change the real world to suit their liking. That's when you get extremists with a skewed worldview, where anything that makes them uncomfortable needs to be put aside or pushed aside.

It's the role of moderate Muslims – they who believe in an Islam that embraces and is open to other religions – that will bring about a Malaysian society that is not at all out of place in the global scheme of things.

So, what's next for you?

I must say, if one is in politics, you must have ambitions. Otherwise, why step into the arena? At the same time, I don't want to be too ambitious. By so doing, I may end up limiting my horizon in terms of what I do and say. I don't want to feel that what I say and do must be dictated by where I want to end up going. That, to me, is a compromise of principles.

Do you harbour ambitions of being a minister?

It's outside my control. It's not something that I can determine for myself. But I feel that I'm 100% loyal to the party and will do everything I can to strengthen it. If my efforts are acknowledged and they feel I can better contribute under a higher position, then by all means.

In the next Umno elections, would you go for the Umno youth head post?

I don't know. That's an option, but not the only option. I have to admit, it sounds interesting to go for that position, but I've not decided.

What other options are you considering?

Supreme Council or even not do anything. 