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Staying vocal for Umno's sake

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad speaks about his hopes and fears for Umno ahead of the party's general assembly.

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad must be among the minority of Malaysians who are not enslaved by their handphones.

He owns a sleek Blackberry Storm that, he admitted rather sheepishly, he only uses to receive and occasionally make calls.

"Mostly calls are to and from my family. Not many people know my number," he said.

In any event, not many people would dare call him even if they had his number.

He also uses the computer mainly to update his blog (24 million visitors to date), surf a few websites and Google for information.

He is still very much a print-material person. Ironically, this is the man who facilitated a technological shift in this country during his tenure as Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir was chewing on a Snickers bar at the start of the interview because it had been a long morning and his blood sugar

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TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Dr M: Bridge project is not about my vision

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an easy thing to do."

There are also a few nagging issues where he is concerned about. He is still disappointed over the policy reversal on the medium of instruction in the teaching of mathematic and science.

The Johor bridge project is still an issue. Is the bridge so important to him because it will boost the economy or is it because it is part of his vision?

"It's not about my vision. There is this perception that the Government is afraid of Singapore, that it does not want to build it because Singapore is against it."

Knowing Dr Mahathir, this issue

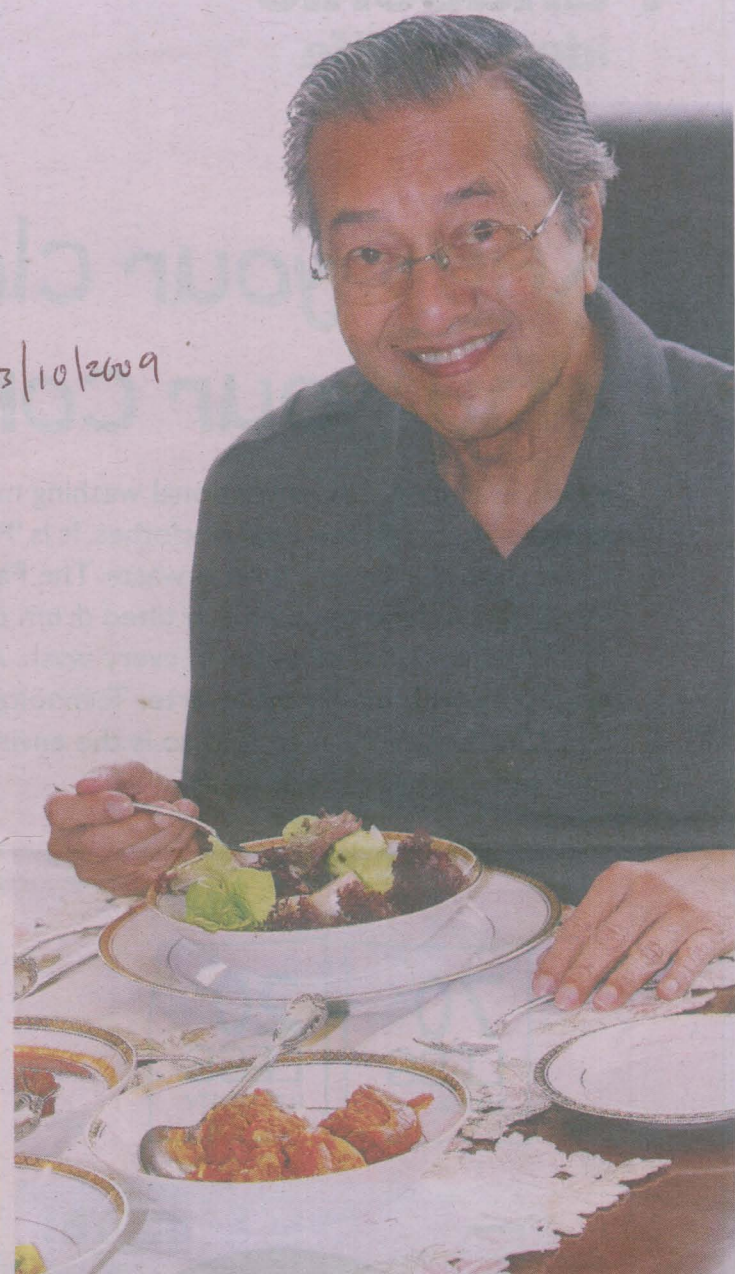
is not likely to fade away soon.

"Speaking out is not something I enjoy doing. It's something that I must do. If everything is fine, I don't think there is a need for me to open my mouth."

At this juncture of the interview, Dr Mahathir's staff signalled that it was time for his lunch - a homely spread of curry chicken, stir-fried french beans, salted fish, papadam, green salad and rice.

When he was the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir was specific about not being photographed during his meals.

He does not mind opening his mouth to speak out but he dislikes being photographed with his mouth open.



Break time: Dr Mahathir having his lunch after the interview yesterday.

level had dipped somewhat.

He is looking forward to attending the opening of the Umno general assembly on Thursday where Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will make his first presidential address. His presence will be a clear signal of support for the new Umno president.

This will be the second time he is attending the opening since he left office.

He had been to Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first assembly as president but things went downhill between them after that and he has since stayed away from party's assemblies.

Things are still not going well between them although his tone softened when he related how Abdullah had stayed back after Friday prayers recently to shake his hand.

This assembly is about amending the party's constitution but Dr Mahathir pointed out that amendments are not a magic cure for ills in the party. The members' mindset about politics and leadership must also change.

"It will not do the party any good if the people do not reject corrupt leaders. Members must not think of themselves only but of the party and the community.

"There is no point in having people who succeed in winning a party post through dubious means, but who cannot help the party win in elections. For example, they have chosen a Youth leader, but when there is a by-election, they say there is no need for him to come. This is very peculiar."

Like all Umno members, he is pleased about the outcome of the

Bagan Pinang by-election. He had been vocal about picking Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad for the seat.

"I didn't want Isa simply because of his track record, nothing personal. But I really wanted Umno to win. A loss would have been disastrous. I thought the majority would be reduced but it was overwhelming.

"The people there really wanted him. Sometimes my views are not correct but I was only partly wrong," he said in a rare admission that he is not always right.

Dr Mahathir had been vocal in the run-up to the party elections earlier this year, telling Umno members to choose clean and capable leaders who can help the party recover from the political tsunami of the last general election.

He observed that there has been a lot of improvement since the new Umno leadership took over.

"There is still a lot of work that needs to be done especially in winning over the general public, especially those in the middle class. They have yet to feel the impact of the economic policies. That is important if they are to be convinced that things are improving."

Dr Mahathir said Najib did not have much time to accomplish his agenda as there are only two more years before the next general election.

"Most of the Barisan Nasional component parties, except those in Sabah and Sarawak, are still in trouble. The coalition has to improve very quickly which is not