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ANALYSIS  
JOCELINE TAN  
joceline@thestar.com.my

**T**UN Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in a rather good mood when he sat down for this interview. He had just given a witty speech at a healthy ageing conference where he had the audience tickled pink when he told them to avoid facial hair if they wanted to look younger.

Now we know why he has been clean-shaven for as long as anyone can remember.

The former premier also told them not to work too hard, which is not the most heartfelt of advice from a workaholic like him.

This is the man who used to hop off the plane after a long overseas trip and head straight for his office and was once photographed reading the *Financial Times* in bed.

On the day of the interview, he had just returned from Tokyo after speaking at the Nikkei Forum for Asia, an annual feature.

The Japanese are still gaga about him and they ought to be. Until he made Malaysians look East, Japan's main claim to fame in these parts was its occupation of Malaya and the Honda motorcycle.

He was in one his famous Nehru-collared suits. Tun Razak Hussein made the bush jacket famous but Dr Mahathir makes a fashion statement of his Nehru suits.

He looked picture perfect against the ultra-modern architecture of his 86th floor office in the Petronas Twin Towers, one floor above that of the Petronas chairman.

One has to be escorted by a police officer up a bullet-speed lift that stops on the 42nd floor, get into another lift that goes to a holding area on the 83rd floor before taking yet another lift to Dr Mahathir's office.

At about the same time across town, Barry Wain, the author of *Malaysian Maverick*, the most compelling account yet on the Mahathir years, was giving a talk on the book which is in its sixth reprint.

Dr Mahathir has been quite blasé about the controversial book. The man is no stranger to controversy and one suspects that although he can't be all that happy about some of the exposes, the book is still a recont of his legacy as prime minister.

But all that was about a week before the Israeli violations against the humanitarian ships carrying aid to Gaza.

By then, Dr Mahathir was one angry man because the Palestinian cause has always been close to his heart. Moreover, one of the ships in the aid flotilla was sponsored by his Perdana Global Peace Organisation.

Dr Mahathir is a very happening man for an 84-year-old. He makes news internationally and at home and more often than not in controversial ways.

Tomorrow, he is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at a Malay rights rally in Kuala Terengganu. It is organised by Gertak, the umbrella body for some 45 Malay NGOs from Terengganu, with the theme of Melayu Bangkit (Malay awakening).

Gertak, a sort of Terengganu version of Perkasa, made news when it tried to organise a rally on May 13.

May 13 is still an emotion-loaded date for the older generation. Malaysians and many were horrified that anyone would hold a rally on that date, what more a Malay rights group.

But they were even more outraged to learn that Malaysia's most esteemed statesman had agreed to address the rally.

The rally was eventually cancelled at the request of the Prime Minister.

The man behind Gertak is Umno politician Razali Idris, the deputy chief of the Marang division who lost to PAS' Datuk Sen Hadi Awang in the last elections.

Razali formed Gertak following the High Court ruling over the Allah issue earlier this year but it has since taken on a host of other Malay issues.

He said his group had been unhappy about the High Court decision and had planned to have the rally in January. The group wanted only Dr Mahathir as the key speaker and no one else. But Dr Mahathir was unavailable.

"So we postponed it to February, then March, April, May. Finally, Tun said he was

# The happening man

**Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stunned many Malaysians when he agreed to speak at a May 13 rally but he says he only wants to send a clear message that the racial violence of that black day in history must never be repeated.**



**Making waves:** As of press time, Dr Mahathir is on schedule to address a Malay rights rally in Kuala Terengganu that was to have taken place on May 13. *The Star* interviewed him at his ultra-modern penthouse office on the 86th floor of the Petronas Twin Towers.



**Razali:** The man behind the Malay rights Gertak is expecting a big turnout at the Melayu Bangkit rally.

free on May 13; that's how the date was fixed. It was not because we wanted to provoke anybody," said Razali.

Now that the cat is out of the bag, what did Dr Mahathir have in mind in picking such a date to speak?

"I wanted to go to the May 13 function not to raise racial issues. My aim was to say to all these people why it is important not to forget the past," said Dr Mahathir.

He said it was totally erroneous of people to think he was going to incite racial feelings at the rally. People, he said, should understand history in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The master tactician in him probably knew he would not get the desired press coverage if he said what he had wanted to say on just any old day. But to say it on the most political day of the year would guarantee him widespread media attention.

Many people out there are convinced Dr Mahathir is the mastermind behind Perkasa. After tomorrow, these folk will probably think he is also behind Gertak.

The thing about Dr Mahathir is that one

cannot read him or interpret his words and actions too literally. He did not survive his opponents and the hurdles in Umno politics by being an open book.

The premise to understanding his actions, especially in the last few years, is that this man genuinely cares about Umno and will do his utmost to make sure the party does not fall from power.

He had been watching the way things unravelled after the 2008 elections. He saw how restless the Malay ground has been.

"In almost every state, there are Malay NGOs coming up to express their views. Umno will not like it but the fact is their faith in Umno as their defender has eroded.

"Umno won by narrow majorities in a number of seats. When you win narrowly, you cannot afford to alienate anybody or say I don't care. A few more votes gone and you lose the seat."

He experienced that in the 1969 elections.

He had won the Kota Setar seat in 1964 by 4,200 votes. By 1969, he had become known for his ultra views but thought he could win again on Malay support.

But the Malay vote was divided between Umno and PAS, and the Chinese and Thais not only spurned him but gave their votes to PAS and he lost.

He sees a situation of this sort happening on a larger scale now.

"BN cannot afford to antagonise any Malays or we will lose the election. If we don't get the Chinese vote and we lose Malay vote, how can the BN win?"

The reason why he is giving attention to groups like Perkasa and Gertak is to make sure they do not stray too far from the ambit of Umno and do serious damage to the party.

"I've been to Perkasa meetings but I'm not a member. If you had listened to my speech, I said clearly we cannot just look after the interest of Malays but of other communities as well."

He said he tries to "soften" some of the stands taken by Perkasa president Datuk Ibrahim Ali.

"Some people don't like him. They find him too brash but he reflects the feelings on the

ground although in his own extreme way. That's why he gets support.

"A lot of these NGOs are also Umno members. They told me they had been voting BN all their lives but they didn't like Pak Lah's leadership and they took their votes elsewhere. That's how PAS won by such a big margin in Kedah."

People, he said, have to be able to express their unhappiness.

"It's dangerous if people don't talk openly and you think all is well. That's what happened in 2008.

"If we allow Malays to feel that Umno is no longer their defender and if the Chinese do not give their support, then BN is sure to lose in the next election."

Those partial to conspiracy theories think Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir are doing a good cop-bad cop thing.

They think Najib is talking the 1 Malaysia lingo while Dr Mahathir manages the Malay Agenda thing. It is what journalists would call a sexy story but it is simply not the case.

Najib is very clear about what his premiership is about.

As for Dr Mahathir, he is not into playing second fiddle. He dances to his own tune, he has his own ideas and he knows how to put them into action.

However, there is no doubt he really wants Najib to succeed not so much for Najib's sake but for the sake of the party he has supported all his life and which he left and returned to twice.

He admits that his expectations tend to be sky-high but Najib, he said, has done a better job than Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"Najib has shown leadership. He has pressed some of the right buttons. Unlike Abdullah, all the wrong buttons."

In the meantime, Dr Mahathir will do what he has to do for his party.

"I am free, I am not in the Umno supreme council, I'm just an ordinary member, I can go anywhere and say what I want. If the party doesn't like it, they can expel me."

Some things do happen in threes but another exit from Umno is not going to happen for this happening man.