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'Kongsi concept key to our peace and harmony'



BACK in the 1990s, when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was at the peak of his prime ministership (he was hovering around 70), he was asked, out of curiosity, by reporters during one of his engaging media conferences on what made him tick vigorously, despite heart by-passes, other surgeries and ailments.

A special diet, obviously, good genes, naturally, but more intriguingly, tantalising urban legends that he made annual pilgrimages to Switzerland for blood transfusions, besides gulping down a monthly fortune in exotic medication, the inquiry suggested.

Chuckling at the proposition's outlandishness, Dr Mahathir had a succinct answer to his vitality: Pharamton.

It must be a zinger of a health supplement because he still pops it

regularly and it mirrors, as he approaches an amazing 88 in June, his elegant physique and probing mental acuity that are robust enough to fell younger political opponents.

In stepping down from his prime ministerial hot seat in October 2003 after a 22-year run, Dr Mahathir had executed his final official duty.

He has since accentuated his private citizenry, which holds a potent grip on public imagination.

The riptide of high-profile critiques, observations, insights and missives, dispatched from his immensely popular blog and articulated in never-ending speaking engagements, elevated him into a statesman "intellectually licensed to kill" — his words probably satirical, mocking, double-edged and not just aimed at domestic political foibles but, also, Western inanities and bullies.

It is this formidable intellect, the

UPCLOSE & PERSONAL with Tun Dr Mahathir

one who constantly prods Malaysians with blunt assertiveness, biting clarity and historical didacticism, that was demonstrated in a luxuriant 90-minute interview with the *New Straits Times* journalists **RASHID YUSOF**, **AZMI ANSHAR**, **ROZANNA LATIFF** and **ZAHARI ZAKARIA**, who captured an exquisite portrait of the former PM in his stylish 86th floor office at the Petronas Twin Towers.

Octogenarian, you exclaim, but Dr Mahathir's trademark penetrative

posits and rippling ripostes were elemental in the range of questions and mini-commentaries posed to him.

He was cogent on the idea that the acceptance of *kongsi* leadership is the essence of Malaysian peace and harmony.

He postulated ideas on regaining Chinese support for the government and a deeper understanding on the insistence that in all negotiations, Chinese education is not to be compromised.

He had a dim view of Malay language nationalists who oppose the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English and yet, brazenly co-opts English words into the Malay vocabulary that erase legitimately practical Malay words.

He suggested that Margaret Thatcher stuck her neck out to save Britain from global oblivion and Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak

worked harder than he ever did.

When he was reminded that his observations reminded us of a certain ex-PM, he quizzically looked around and beseeched: "Where? Where?"

All right, his wry sense of humour was gleefully intact, even as he mused earnestly over the cutlass overtures of Lim Kit Siang, the chameleon-like ins-and-outs of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the broken promises of Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who conveniently ignored his pledge to resign as Kelantan menteri besar if Dr Mahathir did so as PM.

The interview was finite, regrettable, ending just when things were getting to be more intriguing, but Dr Mahathir's private banter was as towering as the tallest twin towers in the world, which he helped conceive as the ultimate soapbox to inspire collective hopes and dreams.

Question: The media once asked what you took every day and you said (nutritional supplement) Pharamton, and there are urban legends saying that you get blood transfusions every year in Switzerland.

Answer: I still take Pharamton (laughs). People ask me all kinds of questions (about this), including whether I spend RM5,000 every day on medicine.

Question: There has been a change in the political outlook of segments of the Chinese com-

munity, who have been very supportive of the Alliance and Barisan Nasional (BN). What do you think has changed?

Answer: When we became independent, the Malays and Chinese were working closely together under the concept of *kongsi*, as mooted by Tunku Abdul Rahman. We shared. Sharing, of course, means that each (race) has to sacrifice something. That worked very well. It enabled the three races to work together and because of that, there was stability and the country was able to develop.

In 1964, (Singapore's) People's Action Party came in. Despite their agreement with Tunku not to contest in the peninsula, they came in, bringing with them the slogan "Malaysian Malaysia". The slogan implied that in Malaysia, there was no equality and that the Malays took everything for themselves.

That (argument) was actually rejected by the Chinese community in 1964 — PAP lost and won only one seat. Subsequently, when Singapore left Malaysia, DAP took over that slogan and kept on preaching that there was inequality in Malaysia

and therefore, they should force the Malays to give up whatever rights they may have.

Of course, they have never mentioned the rights of the Chinese and Indians, only Malay rights.

Unfortunately, Malays tended to merely defend themselves, but were not able to counter the DAP's "Malaysian Malaysia" argument.

Over the years, more and more people who were not conversant in the *kongsi* concept which launched Malaysia began to make comparisons and came to believe that there was no equality between the races,

that the Malays took everything.

These younger people, not knowing the background or the need for us to *kongsi*, felt that they should be treated without any form of differentiation. So, they began to talk about meritocracy. This is played up by DAP.

In 2004 and even 1999, (the Chinese support for BN in the general elections) was fantastic.

But (also) by 2004, what had begun to develop was a general disaffection for BN, for various reasons.

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