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Dr M pays tribute to Kuan Yew

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RESPECT: Asean lost strong leadership after Suharto and Lee, says ex-PM

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WHILE they were not close friends, the passing of Lee Kuan Yew has filled former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad with sadness.

On his personal blog, Malaysia's longest serving prime minister said he was saddened over Lee's passing, a person he had known since he was young.

"I was a student in Singapore when I read about his defence of labour unions," he said, adding that he first met Lee when he was a member of parliament in 1964.

"We crossed swords many times during debates, but there was no enmity, only differences in our views of what was good for the newborn nation."

Dr Mahathir said when he became prime minister in 1981, he paid Lee a +courtesy visit, which he described as

a friendly meeting where Lee agreed to his proposal to advance the two countries' time zones by half an hour to better suit the world time zones.

He said when he suffered a heart attack in 1989 and required an open heart surgery, Lee called Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and asked her to delay the operation as he had arranged for the best heart surgeon, an Australia-based Singaporean, to perform the operation.

However, Dr Mahathir said, by then he was already asleep and that the operation was set for the next morning.

"When he was ill, I requested to see him. He agreed, but the night before the visit, the Singapore High Commission received a message that he was very sick and could not see me."

Dr Mahathir said they did eventually meet at a conference in Tokyo, where he approached Lee during dinner and they sat down together to chat.

"His passing marks the end of the period when those who fought for independence lead their countries and knew the value of independence.

"Asean lost strong leadership after former Indonesian president Suharto and Lee," he said.



A woman cries as she pays her last respects to Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew at Parliament House in Singapore yesterday. Reuters pic