

Being Siti Hasmah

Former prime minister's wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali offers an insight into what makes her tick, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali believes in positive thinking.



SHE'S an ardent believer in positive thinking. "When you want to do something, pray for good things. I always pray for blue skies and sunny days," confides former first lady Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali with a wise smile.

And no doubt, with Malaysia's two-time former premier and her beloved husband, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad currently recuperating from his recent health scare, Dr Siti Hasmah, a music enthusiast and cat lover, will be praying even harder for blue skies

So, what else is there to know about one of the country's most beloved matriarchs?

Q: WHAT TALENT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD?

A: Actually, I'm satisfied with what I already have. But if there's one thing I'd never ask for, it's to be a politician. Having two politicians in the family is enough!

Q: WHAT'S IT LIKE HAVING POLITICIANS (HER HUSBAND AND SON, MUKHRIZ) IN THE FAMILY?

A: Terrible! I'm not supposed to know what's happening. Like recently, I was supposed to join my husband for lunch, but I was the only woman there. They talked about politics non-stop, even while they ate. So, I just sat there and ate quietly, and once I was done, I left. I know full well that once I'm gone, their conversation will *jadi lagi rancak* (get more animated)!

Q: DO YOU EVER CONTRIBUTE YOUR POINTS OF VIEW?

A: No, I just listen. Unless they turn to me and say, "Tun Siti..?" Then, I'll say something. We know how *pening* (stressful) all these talk about politics can get. *Ni tak kena, tu tak kena. Cukup lah* (enough already)!

Q: WHAT'S THE MOST ANNOYING THING ABOUT YOUR HUSBAND?

A: He works too hard. No matter how much we advise him to take it easy, he still continues. When I ask him: "Are you ok?" He'll reply he's okay. Then I get told off. He thinks I'll call the doctors immediately if he tells me that he's not okay!

Q: WHAT'S THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND?

A: He's more patient than me. If he has problems, he doesn't really share it with me because I'm a worrier. I'm also not good at hiding my feelings. If Tun has criticised a person and that person comes to the house, my facial expression will betray me. That's why he'd rather not tell me anything!

Q: IF THERE'S ONE ADVICE YOU COULD GIVE TO OUR YOUNG MALAYSIAN WOMEN TODAY, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

A: I'd say, don't marry too late! If they're so focused and are overly qualified (in their career), I don't think they'll end up having many friends. Do I say this to my granddaughters? I do, but they don't take it *lah*. That's the problem.

Tun likes to say that because I was the only girl available to him back then, he had no choice but to marry me. What did I reply to that? I always say that he may have had other girlfriends, but it's not certain that they could have helped him become the prime minister!

Q: WHO WERE YOU CLOSEST TO GROWING UP? YOUR MOTHER OR FATHER?

A: Both. My father was very strict. "Hasmah, you better have good qualifications before you even think of marriage," he'd say. *Ayah*, who was Sumatran, was determined that we all went to school. He'd cane us if we didn't. He was very firm and displayed little expression. He had no favourites; everyone was treated the same.

Meanwhile, my mother was the one who sent me to college in Singapore when I was 21. I remember when we arrived, she hugged me and told me to look after myself and to study hard. Then, she departed in a taxi and I was left there to walk into college by myself. I had enrolled for a medical course at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore.

Q: WHAT'S THE BIGGEST LESSON YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR FATHER?

A: My father was passionate about studying. He was always telling me to be firm and to look after myself. And always be proper. I was very happy to be able to fulfil my parents' wishes. I had 10 siblings – seven boys and three girls – and I'm the youngest girl in the family. My parents wanted for me to become a doctor.

Q: WHAT CAR DID YOUR FATHER DRIVE BACK THEN?

A: One with a canvas roof that we would pull up whenever it rained. When the canvas looked ugly, we had to hold it ourselves. There are three things that I remember from my childhood home. One, a piano, which I recall was already there when I was 3. Second, my father's car, and third, my grandmother.

Q: WHAT WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD HOME LIKE?

A: We stayed in government quarters. It was cramped. I recall that there was a master bedroom and one other room. There were so many of us, but we had to contend with only two rooms. It was a rowdy household and caning was quite common!

Q: WAS YOUR MOTHER A HOME-MAKER?

A: *Mak* was a wonderful housewife and Malay-educated. *Ayah* once found Kak Leha, my eldest sister, putting the younger one to sleep in the room. He saw that she was crying quietly so he asked her why. My sister told him that *Mak* had asked her to put her sibling to sleep, but she hadn't finished her revisions yet.

I remember, by the following day, *Ayah* called this one Chinese Tok to come to our house to take care of us so no one needed to be distracted from their studies. *Ayah* was definitely action-oriented and would not compromise on our education. = intanm@nst.com.my

Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali in her element on the piano.

