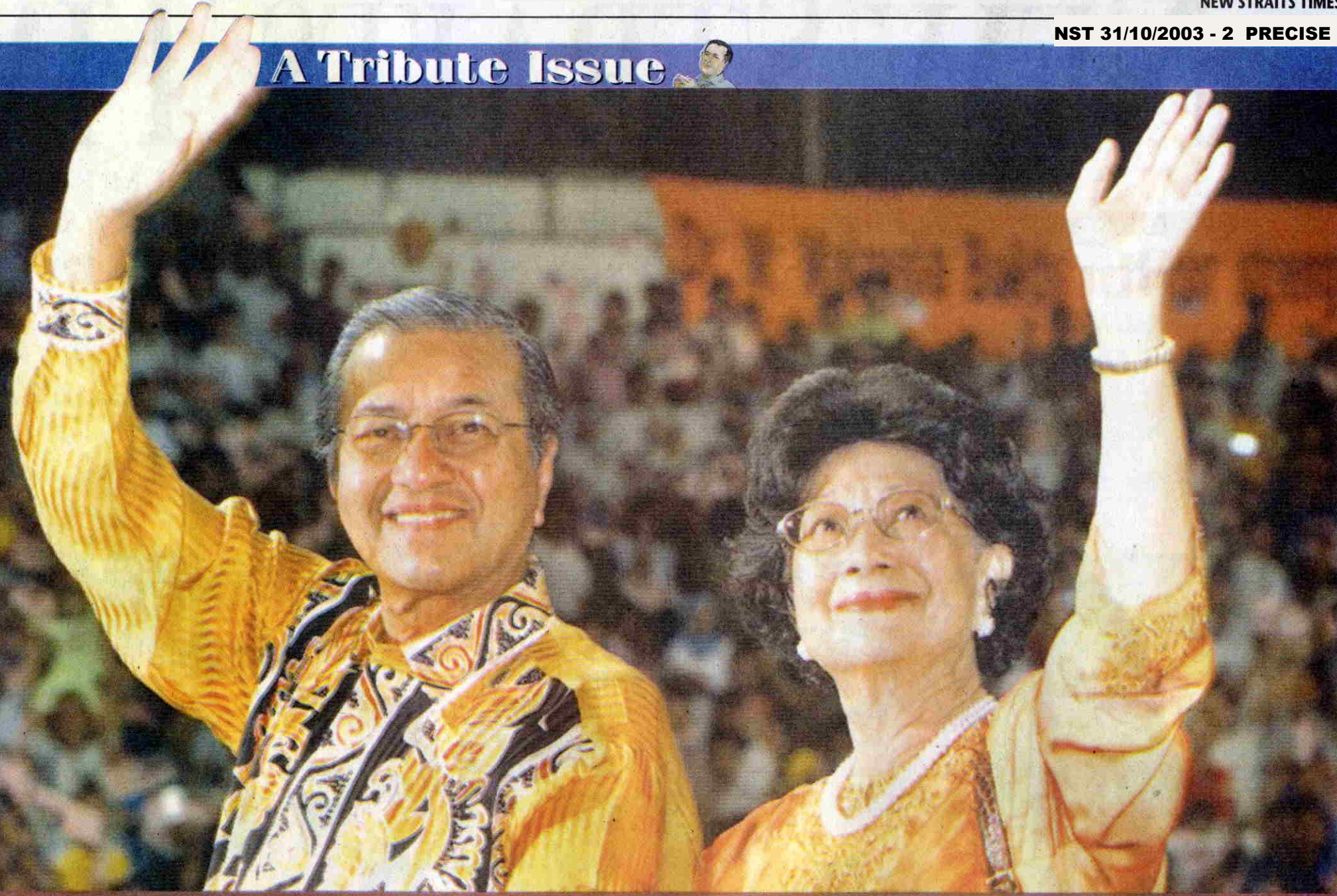


A Tribute Issue



Thank you, Dr Mahathir

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Dear Dr Mahathir,

MAY this letter, written on board flight MH8803 from Port Moresby to Kuala Lumpur on Oct 25, find you and your wife in good health and high spirits. I hope both of you have had a good rest after the brief but hectic official visit to Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea a few days ago. My colleagues and I on that trip saw how busy both of you were then. After the punishing schedule, we were quite glad to see you off at the Port Moresby airport to return to Kuala Lumpur.

We have put together this tribute issue as our sincere appreciation of your leadership over the last two decades. You may not know it, but you have also have learnt. Most of us have enriched ourselves professionally and intellectually by covering you not only during your tenure as the numero uno but in your previous Cabinet portfolios as well. You certainly have taken the post of Prime Minister to a new level. Certainly, you have served King and country with honour, dignity and distinction. But then again, that was just as you'd wanted it.

In the course of our work, we had crossed paths on numerous occasions. I recall covering some of your assignments way back in the '70s when you were quite a firebrand. Before I get pelted with tomatoes, let me say that you are very much a firebrand still. For instance, in the late '70s and '80s you did battle with the trade unions as you sought to contain their tendency to be militant. You now do battle internationally, against adversaries more powerful and difficult. You've had numerous political battles within and outside Umno. You may have been bruised. But you came out very much the victor. As I see it, today you are still battling to change the Malay mindset and take us Malaysians to new horizons.

Many will agree with me if I conclude that a few of those battles were epics in their own right. For example, on the international front, who can ever forget your fight with currency rogue traders, which then triggered your unorthodox measures to solve our financial crisis? At the height of the 1997/98 crisis and with the freefall of the ringgit to almost RM6 against the US dollar, and the stock market index plunging to an all-time low, you took charge, and with precision and guts, changed the tempo with the now well-accepted formula of pegging the ringgit. Mind you, you were also having rearguard trouble then. Perhaps, your training as a doctor gave you the courage and discipline to make the correct incision to save lives. The country was saved by your clear understanding of the problems we faced and the extremely strong sense of responsibility and conviction with which you undertook to discharge your duties as a Prime Minister.

I wish I could join you for a chat over a cup of coffee. But I suppose this letter suffices. This edition of the *New Straits Times* you are holding is a special edition. It is published as a Thank-You edition. My colleagues and I got together to pen a few words and compile them as a collection depicting you in the course of your work over the years. Some of us have concluded that work is more than what it means for you, which explains why you go about doing it with a relish! The articles and pictures published here may have donned our pages. Some have not. We have decided to reproduce them as they have news and historical value. It is the same with the cartoons, drawn by the one and only Lat. With his unique brand of humour, Lat has managed to capture you and draw out the humour as and when you hit the headlines.

As for headlines, you certainly have had more than your fair share of them. There's no doubt as to the newsworthiness of your statements or remarks. They may range from political to sports to international affairs. To us

newsmen and newswomen, you seldom fail to give us "good copy", a newsroom jargon which means you often make interesting news. We have thousands upon thousands of quotes to choose from but narrowed them to those published in these pages. If all of them were to be published, I'm afraid we'd run out of pages.

I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that covering your assignment is both a lesson and a task. It becomes a lesson when you give speeches outlining business plans for the nation, much like the chief executive officer that you are. It becomes a task when we made sure the reports are accurate and capture the tone and spirit with which the comments were made. But I have not found a scribe who declares that covering your assignment is a chore. If the truth be known, many of us would compete to be sent by our editors to provide the necessary coverage.

If we journalists, photographers and editors could "fault" you in so far as our work is concerned — and here let me seek your pardon first before I go further — it is the several assignments you keep in one day and night, the general election campaign aside. There were times when you would have a speaking engagement in the morning, followed by a luncheon address, chairing a meeting which is followed by a Press conference in the evening, only to be topped by a dinner function where you would give an off-the-cuff speech. No free dinners, you used to quip then!

We could all understand why you kept to such a busy (and some say punishing) schedule. You were a man in a hurry for the country's sake. And you wanted every day, every minute, to count. When you go through three or four public engagements, editors have quite a challenge to pick the right picture and the right news to highlight. When overseas, your schedule becomes even more crowded. Battling against time differences, we scribes like to think that we did a fairly decent job. But we couldn't have done so without the help of your key support staff, especially your Press apparatus.

We always wonder how you manage to keep up with such hectic itineraries abroad and yet appear fresh as a daisy on your return to the country. We have known of our fellow scribes getting sick after the punishing schedule with you on the assignments but that apparently is not the case with you. In fact, in many instances, you just attend the next function or go to the next country as a matter of course.

From what I gathered you are not about to take things easy after this. You'd probably have many functions to attend and speeches to make. Whatever you do, please take care of your health. You'd probably not sit still but you'd have more time to be with your family and enjoy the company of your grandchildren. My colleagues and I wish you and Dr Siti Hasmah pleasant days ahead.

Thank you. I'd like to end this letter with an old pantun:
*Pisang emas dibawa belayar
 Masak sebiji di atas peti
 Hutang emas boleh dibayar
 Hutang budi dibawa mati*

Yours sincerely,

Ahmad A. Talib
 Group Editor, NST



WHAT DR MAHATHIR SAID:

This invitation is open to all parties. We are not power-hungry; that's why we are willing to share power with other parties, and more and more of them are joining the Barisan Nasional.

— Extending an open invitation to Opposition parties to join Barisan Nasional, November 2002.