

A Tribute Issue



PATRIOTIC: Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, flanked by Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at this year's Merdeka Day celebration in Putrajaya. With them are (from left) Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, Datuk Ong Tee Kiat, Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor

I am sad that there are people sensationalising news that can have repercussions on the economy.

— Commenting on a newspaper report of a plot to assassinate him and his deputy, December 2001.

I thought my presence would have brought bad omen to our teams, but this time, we won.

— Congratulating the Malaysian SEA Games contingent who defied the odds to emerge overall champions in the 21st SEA Games in 2001, November 2001.

Government contracts have become a trading commodity, being peddled from one place to another.

— Commenting on reports that most contractors engaged to construct computer laboratories for schools had failed to complete their projects, November 2001.

A survivor at every turn

THE EARLY YEARS: 1947-1972, a collection of articles written by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and compiled by Berita Publishing, should have given ample signals to the then political players of Malaya of what seemed to be inevitable.

His thoughts were penned and published as early as 1947 when he was still studying medicine in University Malaya in Singapore.

Even then, when he was still a medical student, he had already shown his knack for understanding the Malay psyche and then expressing controversial opinions on how to solve their problems or on ways to move forward.

In one of his earliest articles written on July 20, 1947, Dr Mahathir had already spoken of the need for reforms in the Malay mindset, urging parents to allow their daughters to pursue education to the highest level possible, apart from wanting political bodies to shape a definite policy to that effect.

Such ideas may be of no consequence today, but Dr Mahathir wrote it at a time when rural, and even urban Malays, believed that the role of their womenfolk was at home.

Pointed out an ardent fan of Dr Mahathir: "He should be considered one of the pioneers in Malaysia who fought for women rights and equality."

The flap jacket of *The Early Years* highlighted his article "Disparities: Helpful Suggestions Needed", written on March 9, 1968, pointing out his sharp observation and analytical mind.

"In America, Britain, Africa and



Judging by the numerous tributes to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it is difficult to imagine that the Prime Minister's political career has been anything but smooth. But he always survived the challenges, especially when most had written him off, writes **SHAMSUL AKMAR**.

neighbouring countries, racial intolerance leading to riots and violence has become a feature.

"If we are not to join them it would be wise to learn from them the etiology, the signs and the symptoms... Being in close contact with the rural Bumiputeras who are incapable of writing intelligent letters in English, I know that the signs and symptoms are already there.

"If I may say so again, soon it may be too late," wrote Dr Mahathir.

Slightly over a year later, the May 13, 1969 tragedy struck, making what Dr Mahathir wrote almost like a prophecy.

The May 13 tragedy is probably the turning point in Dr Mahathir's political career.

It is his writings which propelled him into the political limelight.

The controversial *The Malay Dilemma* was a product of the May 13 race riots and was banned by the then Prime Minister, the late Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra.

The year also saw the expulsion of Dr Mahathir from Umno for a harsh and critical letter to the Tengku and the Alliance Government for "caution and reluctance to take action" which led to the riots.

If the expulsion was seen as an end to his political career, it proved to be otherwise.

When Tun Abdul Razak took over from the Tengku the following year, efforts were

made by several senior Umno politicians to bring Dr Mahathir back into the Umno fold.

In 1972, he was re-admitted and Umno members showed their affection for him, leading to his election as one of the party's three vice-presidents in 1975.

In 1976, the untimely death of Razak saw Tun Hussein Onn succeeding, and there were three vice-presidents for the new Prime Minister to consider for the post of Deputy Prime Minister.

There were numerous stories of intrigue behind Dr Mahathir's ascension to the Deputy Prime Ministership.

Tales within Umno circles had it that Hussein was planning to appoint the then powerful Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie as his deputy, breaking away from the convention of selecting one from among the three vice-presidents.

Many too claimed credit of having been the one to convince Hussein to finally choose Dr Mahathir.

One variant which seemed most plausible is that the three vice-presidents — Tun Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Dr Mahathir — went to see Hussein when they heard that he was planning to appoint Ghazali (popularly known as King Ghaz) as the Deputy Prime Minister.

The story goes that several key Umno players and the three vice-presidents told Hussein that he would spark a revolt within Umno ranks if he went ahead.

Hussein finally relented. Then, it was the question of who to choose from among the three vice-presidents. Finally, Dr Mahathir was picked.

Whatever intrigue and displeasure that arose from Dr Mahathir's appointment dissipated soon after, and he was definitely on his way to greater things. At least that was how it was viewed then.

In 1981, Hussein announced his resignation and Dr Mahathir automatically took over as Prime Minister. Again, it was not incident-free, as almost immediately after he took over, his political secretary Siddique Ghouse was arrested for suspected espionage for the Soviet Union.

Again, there were suspicions of political intrigue working against Dr Mahathir. To observers, even if it was true that Siddique was guilty, the timing of the arrest was too conveniently coincidental.

That, however, failed to stop Dr Mahathir's progress.

His leadership, soon joined by Tan Sri Musa Hitam as his deputy, was hailed as the most dynamic the nation had seen since the time of Razak and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman.

The media dubbed the new leadership the two Ms, the initials of Dr Mahathir and Musa, only to discover that only one term into their tenure, the dream team was breaking up.

In 1986, Musa resigned, citing irreconcilable differences with Dr Mahathir.

That was the beginning of the biggest



political challenge in Dr Mahathir's career as Prime Minister and Umno president.

In 1987, the Umno elections saw one of the most bitter contests in the party's history.

Tengku Razaleigh teamed up with Musa to challenge Dr Mahathir and his then chosen deputy Ghafar for the top two party posts.

The outcome of the polls was indeed close — Dr Mahathir and Ghafar defeated the Tengku Razaleigh/Musa team by fewer than 50 votes each.

The bitter contest did not end there. The election process and results were taken to court, leading to the de-registration of Umno.

Then, a splinter group emerged, which later became known as Semangat 46, led by Tengku Razaleigh and several Umno Cabinet Ministers.

But Dr Mahathir managed to



RELAXING EVENING: Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah enjoying the two-hour performance by tenor Jose Carreras. On the left is Tan Sri Yeoh Tiong Lay, YTL Corporation Bhd executive chairman

■ TURN TO PAGE 23

The thorny path he took

NST 31/10/2003 - 4, 23

At moments like that, I made such statements. But you may remember I have also said that I will never accept Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in but he is with us now. I am a very forgiving kind of person.

— When asked about Parti Bersatu Sabah's intention to rejoin Barisan Nasional, November 2001.

As a terrorist, he should be outlawed by the world, should be hunted, captured, tried and appropriately punished.

— Stressing that the definition of terrorism must be based on the acts of terror and not a person's affiliation to any group, religion or race, November 2001.

■ FROM PAGE 4

consolidate his hold on Umno, then carrying the "Baru" tag and efforts were carried out to help the party and him to close party ranks.

Tengku Razaleigh and his supporters made inroads in the east coast especially in Kelantan, where the Semangat 46 leader originates.

By the time the 1990 general election was held, Kelantan was a foregone conclusion. Umno lost all seats in the State to the combined force of Semangat and Pas.

However, things started picking up for Dr Mahathir after the 1990 general election. The nation's economy improved and in 1993, he had a new deputy. Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim won the post in the party election after Ghafar decided to withdraw in the face of impossible odds.

Together, the nation again had a dynamic team.

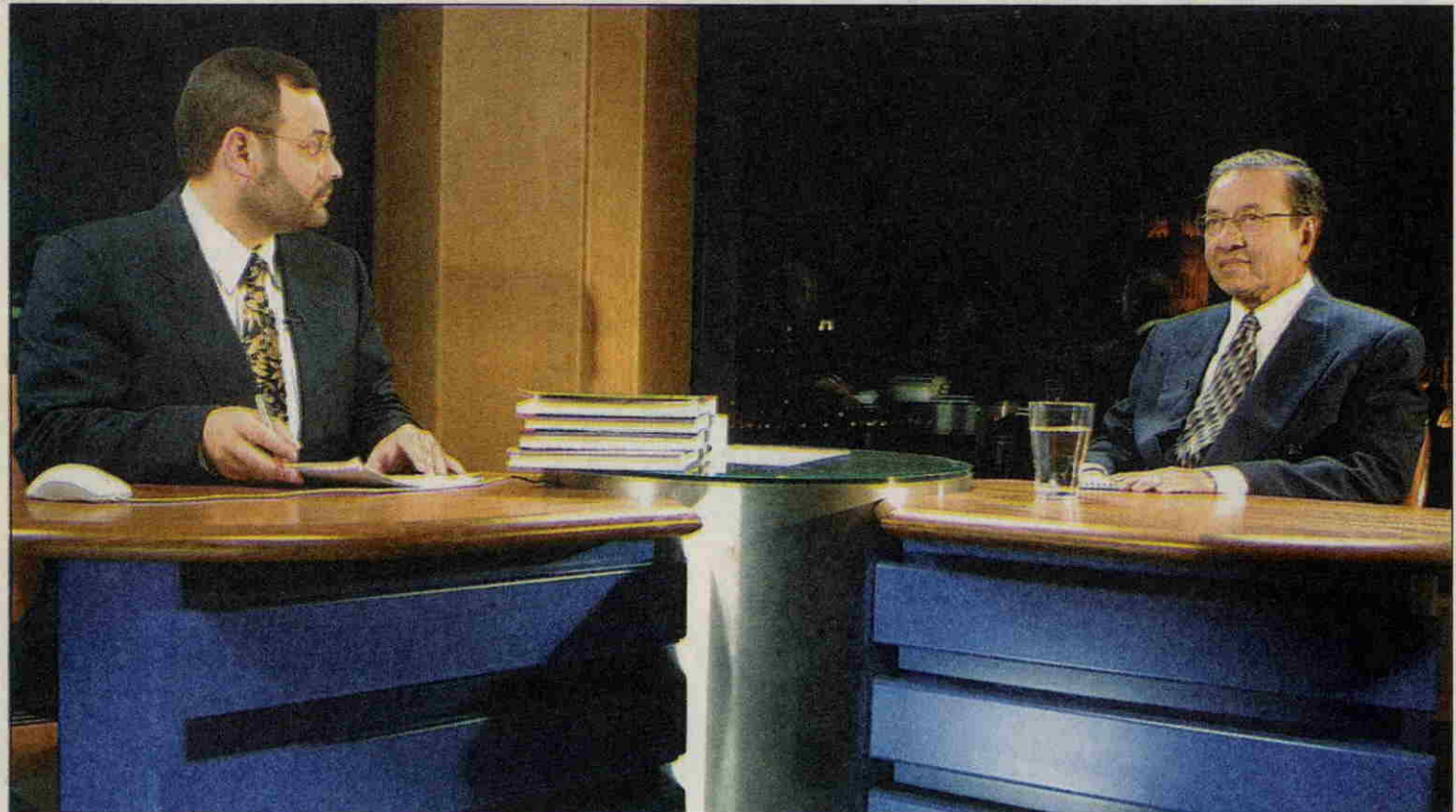
The constitutional crisis of 1993/94 saw the two taking on the Malay Rulers, long considered above the law, and made the institution aware of its vulnerability if excesses, especially abuses affecting the *rakyat*, were not stopped.

The 1995 general election, which saw the biggest share of popular votes garnered by the Barisan Nasional in the history of the nation's elections, showed the support and trust the Malaysian populace had in Dr Mahathir and his Cabinet.

However, two years later, the comfort zone was breached. First came the currency crisis caused by rogue speculators.

Then came the looming threat of having to turn to the International Monetary Fund, whose prescriptions had turned nations into soggy vegetables.

If that was not enough, a political crisis brewed within Umno circles, with certain players harping or questioning the issue of corruption, collusion and nepotism, a similar strategy used in neighbouring Jakarta where opposition to then President Suharto used the clarion call of



IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: Dr Mahathir being interviewed by Ahmed Mansour for Al-Jazeera TV

KKN — *korupsi, kolusi and nepotisma*.

Suharto was brought to his knees by anti-KKN forces promoting their cause under the guise of *reformasi*.

Anwar was then sacked by Dr Mahathir for moral misconduct and the ousted deputy decided to immediately adopt the call for *reformasi*, similar to that in neighbouring Indonesia.

Joining him were all the opposition forces in the nation and it began to look like Dr Mahathir had finally met his match.

However, he again survived the political challenge and brought Malaysia out of the economic crisis with unconventional measures, which was widely criticised locally and abroad.

Today, most of his critics have changed their views about him and as he prepares

to step down, one of the biggest tributes is probably the vindication of what he was criticised for.

This has been the path taken by one of the most illustrious Prime Ministers Malaysians have ever had. The tributes do not seem to stop and they are not expected to end long after he steps down on Oct 31.

The path he took was without doubt thorny, to say the least. But that has a lot to do with Dr Mahathir, full of paradoxes amid his pragmatism.

Loved and cherished, hated and despised, Dr Mahathir is an enigma.

■ The writer is the Assistant Political Editor at the NST.

