

To ensure ... a good relationship (with the people) you have to be sensitive to the problems the public face.

— On Police Day 1983.

We in Malaysia believe the first line of defence of any country is not its military capabilities ... (but its) national resilience and shaping a strategic environment in which threats are minimised ... (and) the policy of making friends with those who want to be friends with us.

— At the Global Community Forum, December 1984.

Although Muslims are proud of what is considered a new realisation among the brethren all over the world, in reality, Muslims are divided and fighting against each other and ultimately, warring against each other.

— Opening the national level Quran-reading competition, May 1983.

Let us pledge ... our mutual commitment to widening and deepening the channels of communication and contact, in the interest of further improving the tone and texture of the relationship between our two democratic societies.

— At a White House luncheon on Jan 18, 1984, held by then United States President Ronald Reagan.



PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES: In his long career, Dr Mahathir has taken many modes of transport (clockwise from far left): Dr Mahathir behind the controls of a McDonnell Douglas MD-11 at Lima '93; the Prime Minister boards the Eastern & Oriental Express at the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station, 1993; Dr Mahathir getting the feel of a Lotus Elise at Selangor's Shah Alam circuit, 1997; the Prime Minister has reason to celebrate — the bicycle presented to him in 1998 by Tour de Langkawi organisers is a far cry from the one he rode during the Japanese Occupation!

Still waters run deep

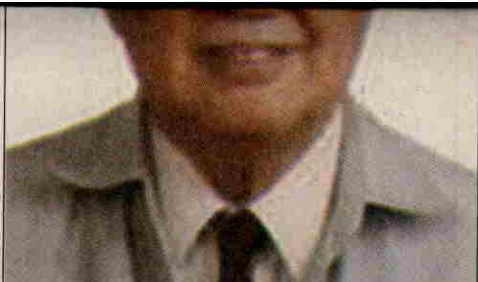
NST 31/10/2003 - 19, 21 PRECISE

'Quiet'. 'Unobtrusive'.

'He wouldn't push himself forward'.

Time and again, the

Prime Minister's former collegemates describe him as even-tempered and unruffled. Here, writes **SHARIFAH AL-ATTAS**, four of them share with us the Dr Mahathir that they know — and love.



MOHD ZAIN: 'If he weren't called on, he'd be silent'

MOHAMED ZAHIR: 'He could crack jokes with the best of them'

KOH: 'He was a real gentleman ... a friendly fellow'

DATUK MOHD ZAIN ABDUL RASHID, 90, was Dr Mahathir's boyhood English teacher at Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star, Kedah. "Apparently, after two years at Malay school, his father had decided it would be better if his son were to go to an English school."

"I stayed on Jalan Seberang Perak in Alor Star, near the wet market. So did Dr Mahathir. Since everyone knew everyone else, we knew who lived where and who was the son of whom."

As a young boy, he'd get to school by trishaw. Then, he learned to balance himself on a two-wheeled bicycle. From then on, he cycled to school.

I taught English and History. The history that was taught was, of course, the history of the British Empire.

In those days, if a boy wished to try and find favour with his teacher, he'd sit right under his nose ... in the first two or three rows. Mahathir would never do this. He chose to sit somewhere in the middle, five or six rows from the front. Also, he was usually perfectly quiet — so quiet, in fact, that I wondered why he wouldn't make a sound; especially as another teacher had observed that of all the boys in school, the best English speaker may have been Mahathir. This teacher had discovered that, in his father Mr Mohamad's house, English books abounded.

If he weren't called on, he'd be silent. The other boys would sometimes wail, 'Why don't you ask him?' So I did. And they were flabbergasted, because he replied in detail and at length!

I used to see him staggering under the weight of a bag full of books. I'd think, 'What on earth has this boy got in that bag?' Other boys had bags, but they were small and light enough to tuck under their arm. Mahathir's was slung over his shoulder.

In the evenings, the boys would gather their friends and play at spinning tops or marbles. Mahathir wanted to as well. He was allowed to — but for just a while. Then his parents would make sure he'd be back pronto, doing his schoolwork.

In the old days, we had a subject known as *Conversation*. I'd stick a big picture up on the blackboard, where all the boys could see it — a picture of a

padi field, a buffalo, a cow. Then I'd ask, 'How do you say, *kerbau* in English? How do you say, *padang*?'"

Mahathir wouldn't say a word unless asked to. If the boy who answered got it right, he'd nod silently. Sometimes, he'd add a question of his own. But if the answer were wrong, he'd pipe up. And in the Literary and Debating Society, of which he was member, he'd really come into his own, stunning the boys with his eloquence!

Like many Malaysians, Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat TUN MOHAMED ZAHIR ISMAIL, 79, had his education interrupted by the Japanese Occupation. Sultan Abdul Hamid College, where he and the future Prime Minister were students, closed in 1942; it reopened three years later.

"Dr Mahathir read; books — over and over. So as not to forget his English. During the Occupation, Mahathir had spent much time continuing to study English. I hadn't — I'd worked in a Japanese company, and had to study Japanese."

I don't know why he didn't work with the Japanese and learn their language. I feel, though, that he didn't want to work with them. That he abhorred the atrocities they committed. He didn't approve of their soldiers' behaviour.

When we returned to school, we were in the same class. But because he could read English, he could understand English-language newspapers and magazines.

One morning before class, he came to our form clutching the *Straits Times*, exclaiming that the British intended to introduce Malayan Union, to colonise our country, since they'd returned and —

according to them — won the war.

We were all interested in politics, because we'd all experienced Japanese atrocities; the difficulties of wartime.

When Mahathir burst into the classroom waving the *Straits Times*, we were already imbued with patriotism — the hardships of the Occupation had ensured that. Also, the Japanese had stressed that Asia was for the Asians; Soekarno had helped gain Indonesian independence; India was demanding hers; all over the world, colonies were coming into their own.

When Mahathir told us Malaya would be a British colony, and the sultans relegated to the position of *qadi* in their respective States, we were extremely alarmed.

He may have been mistaken for a firebrand. But his way was quiet; even now, he speaks in an almost expressionless drawl.

He could be humorous. He could crack jokes with the best of them. But quietly, slowly, in his fashion.

He's always been like that. And what he says is more important than how he says it.

He was worked up only when he had an argument — which wasn't very often.

He was passionately against Malayan Union. We'd argue about what should be done, the path we should follow. We all opposed Malayan Union, though, so there wasn't much to argue about!

The British introduced Malayan Union in 1946. We moved in the same circles, then. In protesting Malayan Union, we saw each other almost every day.

Daily, we'd cycle into Alor Star. That was a 3km trip. It took 45 minutes each way.

Our bicycles were old, and falling apart. During the Occupation, there wasn't air in rubber tyres. Tyres had been damaged, there were no new ones, so people improvised. There was virtually no cushioning, which made for bumpy rides!

But then, we were young; we could take it.

Girls? No. He was such a quiet and earnest man. He'd read much of the time — and in those days, girls weren't as free as they are today! They were kept at home. Even in school, I remember only one girl. If there were schools for girls, they were entirely separate. He was extremely quiet and very determined. Very self-disciplined.

He was punctual to the minute; he made promises — and kept them.

If assigned a task, he'd do it without hesitation; without excuses for not being able to. He was studious.

When we both became MPs in 1964, we'd sometimes come to KL together to attend meetings of the Dewan Rakyat and stay in hotels together. He'd invented his own physical exercises. In hotels and whatnot, he'd get up in the morning and begin: pushing up and down and so forth!

He has gifts: a rapid understanding of issues and situations; a grasp of detail. When he observes something, he's already thinking if and how it can be improved.

We built a boat together, actually. We had free time and I bought the plans from the US and showed them to him. He was very interested and so we began our boatbuilding.

It was agreed that he'd put together the body and I the engine. The instruction manual was terrifyingly complicated — but he read it! And so we had a boat, on which we went to Kedah's Pulau Payar.

We were already working; he was a doctor and had a house in Titi Gajah. I was a lawyer.

We were both married, and we went to Pulau Payar to fish. He didn't care for fishing much, though, because he didn't care to eat fish! So we'd go to relax, then return the same day. The barrage at Tongkang Yard wasn't yet built. So you could boat from Pulau Payar to Titi Gajah, and berth behind his house.

He has a facility for things mechanical. When I moved into Number 3, Jalan Tunku in KL, where he'd previously been, there was a room in which he'd done carpentry."

DR KOH ENG KHENG, Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah were members of the Class of '47 at the King Edward VII College of Medicine, University of Malaya, Singapore. "We called ourselves the Class of '47," he says, "because we were ragged as freshmen at the same time. We couldn't go by date of graduation, because we got our degrees in different years." Dr Koh, 75, is now family practitioner at Singapore's Chung Kiaw Clinic.

"Since H is close to K on the alphabet,





Out of the ashes of confrontation, Asean rose like the proverbial phoenix. It should really be an economic animal but try as the members might, they have not really succeeded in the field of economic co-operation.

— At the Global Community Forum, December 1984.

The world economy is sick because it no longer relies on trade. Instead it gambles on commodity prices and currencies.

— Opening the third Ascope conference and exhibition, December 1985.

An officer and a gentleman

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and there weren't any Is or Js in our class, Dr Siti Hasmah and I sat next to each other at the biology laboratory of the college. I'd catch her frogs for her!

We had to dissect them — but we had to catch them, first! We'd reach into a large tin bucket full of frenzied amphibians and pluck one out, wriggling and writhing. It was a horrible job, and no-one especially enjoyed it.

Siti Hasmah cringed at the thought of killing them, so I did it for her — skewering each through the skull to destroy the nervous system, putting an end to them instantly. Then, they were spreadeagled face-up on a wax tray, ready for our prodding and poking.

Dr Mahathir, unattached at the time, was a frequent visitor to our corner of the classroom. He sat in the same row, but further down. He'd drift over to see how Siti Hasmah was faring. Soon he'd taken over my frog-catching duties, so you could say he *potong my jalan!*

He was a real gentleman, though — well-behaved, even-tempered; unobtrusive, quiet, really, and never worked up.

He was a friendly fellow, in spite of his later speeches 'anti' this and that. A cheerful sort, and not in the least bit stiff.

He loves cooking, and tells me he makes a mean *mee goreng*. As Prime Minister, he'd give his bodyguards the slip, go to market, buy ingredients and cook up a storm!"

DATUK LIM PEE HUNG was in Standard 6 at Sultan Abdul Hamid College, when Dr Mahathir was in the year above. Formerly MP for Alor Star, Lim, 76, is managing director of Alor Star car dealership Heng Guan.



LIM: 'Anyone could see him'

"Our classrooms were next door to each other. I had only a nodding acquaintance with him then, though; it was later that we really grew to know each other.

Between 1953 and 1957, government medical officer Dr Mahathir was posted to Langkawi. In those days, Langkawi was the equivalent of Siberia: there was no system of transport; almost everything was jungle. No-one wanted to be there, and almost no-one *was* there! I feel he was posted there as punishment. This was after the Japanese Occupation, and the British governed Malaya. Dr Mahathir was a marked man — he was considered a troublemaker, a firebrand.

When he was posted back to Alor Star from Langkawi, shortly before Independence, he applied to the



THE NEXT PICTURE YOU SEE: Home Minister Dr Mahathir is no slouch as a chef! (Home Ministry Family Day, Taman Tasik Perdana Kuala Lumpur, 1990)

government for a car loan. Approval for this would normally take one or two months. His, however, was unusually delayed. Since I then marketed cars for Wearne Brothers in Penang, I got him one. I was a selling agent for British makes Morris, Hillman and Standard.

I put a car at his disposal on trust; it took seven or eight months for his loan to be approved, and in that time the car was his, gratis. I didn't feel there was any risk in this — he was a government servant and, as such, his financial standing was secure. It wasn't a matter of *if* he'd be able to pay for the vehicle — only *when*.

He was a no-nonsense person, with others and with himself. Disciplined and above-board. Open-minded and approachable — anyone could see him.

His private practice was popular. Often, he'd give out free medicines and consultation. Not

many doctors in private practice did so, and he was the only Malay. Even the local Chinese sometimes went to him — traditionally, they'd consult fellow-Chinese doctors."

■ The writer is Specialist Writer at the NST.

