

Accommodating and witty

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Some (countries) said that we were too ambitious and spent beyond our means but these people have already built their cities.

— Silencing criticism against Malaysia's rapid development, August 1997.

There is no point talking to them. They are incapable of telling the truth. They are congenital liars. Even when we do good things, have they ever said anything nice about us? Maybe, if they did not tell lies, they would not be able to sell their newspapers.

— On Australian Press, November 1996.

PAS opposes us blindly. Even though the whole world acknowledges Malaysia as a model Islamic nation, the party cannot accept it. What has PAS done for Islam? I do not see anything except that it contributes to disunity.

— Criticising PAS for causing Malay disunity, October 1996.



Datuk A. Kadir Jasin
Editor-In-Chief, Berita Publishing

DR MAHATHIR makes headlines. That makes him a favourite with the Press. You could always count on him to provide headline stories and good quotes so much so that the Press became addicted to him. Even the belligerent foreign journalists "like" him in their *benci tapi rindu* (love hate) relationship.

But while journalists love his ability to continuously give them headline stories, their editors have nightmares ensuring that the headlines — those three or four words that are supposed to tell the whole story — are correct.

If you are going to have any kind of "problem" (note the quotation) at all with Dr Mahathir, it is almost invariably over the headlines.

He strongly believes that the headlines make the stories and that more people are likely to be influenced by the headlines than the stories. After all, most people read only the headlines.

My first journalism-related encounter with Dr Mahathir took place at his Maha Clinic dispensary in Alor Star in May 1969. He had just lost the election and was about to become headlines.

I was desperately looking for a job after failing to get a place in the university. His response to my request for a letter of recommendation for my job interview with Bernama was something like *lakuah surat saya ni?* (Would my letter have any value?)

The question of *laku* did not quite register in my mind. I was in dire need of employment and could not think of anybody better to make the recommendation.

He wrote a nice one on his typewriter, claiming that he knew me well. It was of course debatable but as the Member of Parliament for Kota Star Selatan (1964-1969), he knew my father well.

I got the job and he went on to make headlines with his book *The Malay Dilemma* and subsequent sacking from Umno in September the same year. Our path did not seriously cross until 1976 when he became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry and I left Bernama to join *Business Times*.

Dr Mahathir and other economic ministers — including the likes of Finance (Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah), Primary Industries (Tan Sri Musa Hitam) and Agriculture (Datuk Manan Othman), — became the staple diet of the paper and being its most senior Bumiputera writer, I had a fairly good access to them.

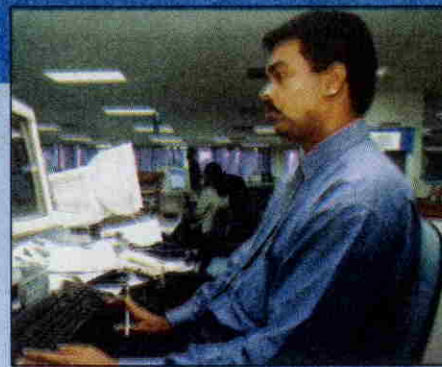
For a few months in 1976/77, Dr Mahathir and the late Raja Tun Mohar Raja Badiozaman became our Deep Throat. They were our informed sources on the acrimonious production sharing agreement negotiations between the fledgling Petronas and the international oil companies.

We would call him on the phone late in the evening and he would refer us to Raja Mohar, who was then the government's petroleum adviser.

My last serious journalism-related meeting with Dr Mahathir was in early 2000 when I met him over my tenure as the Editor-in-Chief of the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad.

At the risk of being presumptuous, I thought we had a good meeting — agreeing to disagree — and parting company with the pledge that we would remain friends. Thank you and God speed, Doctor.

Ashraf Abdullah
News Editor



THE Prime Minister has always been accommodating and witty when dealing with reporters.

I have stopped the Prime Minister to ask him questions at various places, on various occasions.

One of those occasions was during the visit of the President of Burkina Faso Blaise Compaore. The Prime Minister paid a courtesy call on Compaore at the Regent Hotel and was returning to his car.

It was a strange occasion because being Head of State, Compaore was not supposed to send Dr Mahathir, who is Head of Government, back to his car. Going by protocol, it was simply not right.

Not knowing the person next to him was the President of Burkina Faso (I have never seen Compaore before his visit to Malaysia), I stopped Dr Mahathir.

I was speaking to Dr Mahathir for a good five minutes, on an issue totally unrelated to Compaore's visit. The president, too, waited. This incurred the wrath of Dr Mahathir's officers, who later reprimanded me.

I also vividly remember an occasion, the date of which I forget, when Dr Mahathir was asked by a reporter what would happen to his Seri Perdana residence in Kuala Lumpur once he had moved to the Seri Perdana in Putrajaya.

Dr Mahathir promptly responded: "Why, are you interested to buy?"

The reporter didn't say a word.

Dr Mahathir is a leader in his own league. There will never be another Dr Mahathir. I miss him already.

Zubaidah Abu Bakar
Specialist Writer



I'm sure I am not the only one who often wonders if Dr Mahathir has a secret to keeping fit for him to carry out his daily activities, which many people his age and even younger may not be able to cope with.

An incident in Langkawi a couple of years back when I was attached to the Alor Star

bureau was very embarrassing and one which I will not forget.

It was one of those regular visits to the island where Dr Mahathir — clad in white T-shirt, jeans and hat — toured several project sites almost the whole day.

Just past midday and under the hot sun, the entourage drove up Gunung Raya, where the scenery at its peak was beautiful and picturesque.

The tired look on the faces of some journalists who had followed him since early morning was evident.

What a shame, Dr Mahathir, many years older than most of the journalists, climbed the hill and walked around the area without showing any signs of fatigue. He was full of stamina.

Some of us, including me, decided to find a shady area to rest as we were already panting.

Suddenly we heard his voice: "Jom makan air," he said in the northern accent, inviting us to join him for tea at the tea-house located at the peak.

When we looked up, there was a big smile on his face.

Azmi M. Anshar
Assistant News Editor, E-Media



ANECDOTES of just how tireless, cool and articulate the Prime Minister is can easily fill reams of pages. However, one anecdote that doesn't spread as much is just how well read Dr Mahathir is.

I never realised the extent of his range until I was assigned to cover him opening an AIDS awareness fashion event at the Lot 10 shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur in 1992.

After completing the farewell pleasantries, Dr Mahathir took a brisk walk towards the shops on a higher floor, followed by hordes of reporters and photographers, and entered a specialist book store with unusual decor, which sold only hardcover books of literally every persuasion.

After a few minutes of browsing, the Prime Minister took two books to the payment counter.

I don't remember exactly the titles of the books but I remember what they were all about; one was about city neon lights and the other was on hotel and restaurant management.

Not exactly light reading, I wondered. The Prime Minister must have read my mind when he smiled at me.

"I want to get ideas on how to make our cities beautiful," he said as he paid a few hundred ringgit for the books.

Another incident was in 1986. It typically showcased the Prime Minister's wry sense of humour.

Dr Mahathir was giving a routine Press conference at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur after opening an event and, at that time, the nation was agog with reports by certain politicians who complained that the Prime Minister had deliberately made himself inaccessible to his Cabinet Ministers and Umno leaders. Naturally, he was asked to comment on these reports.

"What do you mean I am not accessible? What do you call this?" he said, pointing to the battery of photographers, reporters and observers.

"Do you think the Prime Ministers or Presidents of some countries allow this sort of access?"

"Now look at this reporter," he quipped, pointing at me who was closest to him at that time.

I had long hair and wore a T-shirt and blue jeans. "I don't stop him from being near me or from asking me questions. Most leaders won't allow it!"

Later, word got to the powers-that-be about what the PM quipped about me and it triggered two things; one, the Information Ministry issued a circular that media representatives not dressed in long-sleeved shirts, ties and slacks would not be allowed to cover the PM; and two, I was ordered by my editors to cut my hair and get proper clothes.

Noor Adzman Baharuddin
Penang Bureau Chief



DR MAHATHIR has a good sense of humour.

An example of this was when I was covering the Prime Minister during his visit to Kem Lapangan Terbang in Sungai Petani about eight years ago.

Present too was Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon.

Koh, who had noticed me from the bunch of "Kedah reporters" waiting anxiously to meet the Prime Minister for the Press conference, enquired about my experience in Kedah.

Just then Dr Mahathir approached us and Koh introduced me and said I had been transferred from Penang to the Kedah bureau several months earlier.

The Prime Minister's witty response took all of us, including the Press-friendly Koh, by surprise when he quipped: "Sure ... Or did you banish him to Kedah?"

Hamidah Atan
Staff Correspondent, Negri Sembilan



I REMEMBER covering Dr Mahathir when he and his wife Datuk Seri Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali attended the wedding reception of the daughter of one of his staff members in Bukit Chedang, Seremban, on May 15 this year.

As usual and as expected, he was "mobbed" by many guests, adults and children alike. The PM was walking towards his car while shaking hands with the guests when the uninvited hordes of Press people approached him.

I tagged along with a Radio Televisyen Malaysia microphone in my hand. He drew laughter with his sense of humour when he passed these witty remarks: "Apa mika buat kat sini? Kat majlis ni pun nak tanya ka?"

Despite it being an unofficial function and in sweltering heat, Dr Mahathir still spent time to entertain the Press and answered a few questions posed to him before going into his car.

He fielded the questions in his usual manner — precise, quick and straight-to-the point.

This great leader seems to know very well what the Press wanted and could get from him.

At another unofficial function in Port Dickson on Aug 3, the hordes of Pressmen, apart from his staff who were there for a family day, took the opportunity to ask him several questions.

Before long, the Press people were seen posing pictures with him — which he did so humbly and obligingly.

There were long queues of people who wanted to take pictures with him and never once did I notice that he turned them down, or he looked restless or tired.

This fatherly figure, who donned a cowboy hat on that day, also cracked jokes with his "admirers".

He also did not turn down requests for him to write his signatures on their shirts, hands or just anything they could get a hold of.

Such a thing definitely serves as a 'once-in-a-lifetime memory' for the people. Those who managed to take a few snapshots with him were seen grinning from ear to ear. There were also those who said: "Yes ... I made it."

There were also remarks from those who had shaken hands with the PM, including the Press, that they would not wet their hands at least for a few days for fear that PM's touch would be "gone".

To these people, including myself, meeting Dr Mahathir, even for just a few minutes, serves as glorious and unforgettable moments which we will treasure throughout our whole life.

Dr Mahathir is just irreplaceable.

ARE YOU READY!?

PMR: 99 Hari Lagi!



SPM: 129 Hari Lagi!



STPM: 129 Hari Lagi!



PM: 94 Hari Lagi!



PAK LAM