

This is one of the strengths of multiracial Malaysians, the willingness to place national interest above other interests. The people realise that only in a stable country where a multiracial population lives in harmony can there be development, progress and prosperity.

— On multiracial unity, October 1996.

It is an embarrassment, I feel very embarrassed. We have emerged as a model country for the Third World and everybody comes here to see how we manage this and that ... We invited people but suddenly we couldn't manage our electricity well.

— Expressing displeasure over the nationwide power outage, August 1996.

We are an independent nation and the Government is elected by the people. And do we disregard our independence and submit ourselves to others because they are threatening our currency? What is the meaning of independence and democracy if a leader, who is democratically elected, has to submit to outsiders?

— On ringgit and share manipulation, October 1997.

# Sharp and has a good sense of humour

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Ramliam Said  
Assistant News Editor

COVERING the Prime Minister is certainly a feather in the cap in the career of any journalist. But with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it is more than that. It's a joy. One sure thing is that journalists will not have much problem writing their stories as the Prime Minister often gives good quotes and comments. You can ask him about almost anything — politics, social, economy, sports — from the most mundane topics to breaking news.

Once a journalist asked Dr Mahathir to comment on the deaths of dugong, a sea mammal, in the waters off Johor, much to the amusement of those present at the Press conference.

The woman journalist sheepishly told the Prime Minister that she had been directed by her editors to get him to comment on the matter. As usual, the PM obliged.

That is the best thing about him, he is so accommodating and accessible. "I can hardly remember him saying 'no comment' to questions from reporters," said a senior journalist who has been covering the PM over the last 10 years.

Many foreign journalists are amazed to see how easy it is for the media to approach the PM for comments.

In their countries, they could only dream of "ambushing" their presidents and prime ministers, what more with the tight security thrown around the leaders.

But for Malaysians, scenes of Dr Mahathir being surrounded by newsmen are almost a daily affair as the PM gets on with his punishing schedules — opening an event in Kuala Lumpur in the morning, chairing a meeting in Putrajaya in the evening before flying to Langkawi to inspect projects there.

More often than not, he will oblige requests for a Press conference at the end of the functions.

The Prime Minister is sharp in his replies as can be vouched by foreign journalists who have had the chance to square off with the PM at Press conferences.

The tables are often turned against the seasoned journalists by the PM's no-nonsense and straight-talking comments.

Once, replying to a question from a foreign journalist, Dr Mahathir remarked about how directed at him.

Dr Mahathir shot back. "Do you think you are stupid?" No, came the reply.

"So, if you think you are not stupid, my comment is not aimed at you then."

On another occasion, during a briefing on Malaysia's satellite and space programme, the Prime Minister chided a reporter from a wire agency for being impertinent.

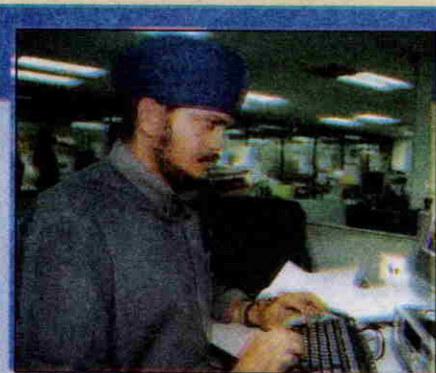
Dr Mahathir had barely settled in his seat when a question was flung his way by the reporter.

The question was about the bomb blast at the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta. Dr Mahathir shot back: "I don't know about the bomb blast but if you are not interested in the (space) programme, we need not have this Press conference."

He was back to his genial self after the function. Approached by reporters who wanted to have their photograph taken with him, Dr Mahathir told his security personnel, who had wanted to whisk him away, that "It's OK" and posed for several shots patiently.

During overseas trips, newsmen have to dig deep into their reserve to match the speed and stamina of the energetic PM. It is not strange to find him attending up to seven functions in a day, a nightmare for journalists who have to contend with deadlines.

"It is work, work and work. I wonder how he is able to keep up with the pace," said another senior journalist who had the opportunity to cover the PM on two of his overseas trips.



Sarban Singh  
Specialist Writer

DURING a visit to University of Malaya after the Dewan Tuanku Chancellors was damaged in a fire, a student claiming to be a representative of undergraduates from Terengganu told the Prime Minister during question-and-answer time that the Government should not get involved in the running of universities.

To this, Dr Mahathir said: "Agreed. We will not interfere in campus affairs but we hope you students will also stay out of Government affairs." The other students present

applauded the Prime Minister's terse reply.

The PM also has his ways with BN component parties. One of the main reasons why former Transport Minister and MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik had submitted his resignation letter in 2000 was because the party was not given extra Government posts after the 1999 election whereas Gerakan was given an additional post of parliamentary secretary.

To this, Dr Mahathir said at a Press conference: "The MCA may have done well in the last general election (1999) ... but today one does well, the next day one does not do so well."

"(And) When the MCA did not do so well (as in the 1990 election), we did not reduce their representation ... it is very bad to try and respond to a certain situation without thinking about the future of the party."

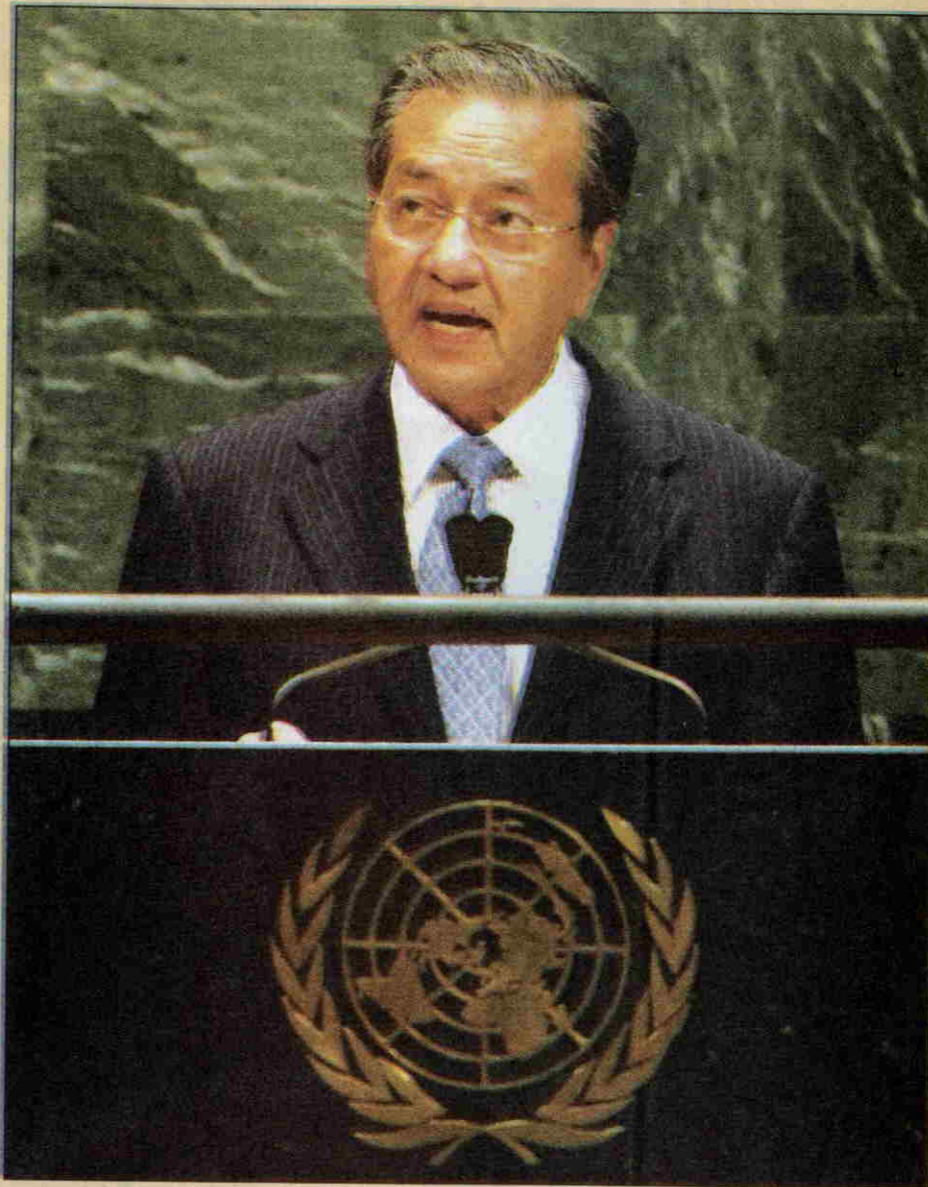
While visiting Tenaga Nasional in May 2001, Dr Mahathir made another classic joke when reporters asked him whether the Government would raise the retirement age for civil servants to 60.

Dr Mahathir said with the higher life expectancy among the Malaysian workforce, the extension was inevitable.

"I know one person who is 76 years old and still working," he said.

Also two months later, while on a visit to Sirim in Shah Alam, the PM was asked whether it was normal for undergraduates to have anti-establishment feelings.

Saying that this was not necessarily true, Dr Mahathir said: "I was a student once but I don't remember being anti-establishment. I was anti-British, yes, but not anti-establishment."



ADDRESSING THE WORLD: Dr Mahathir speaking at the 58th United Nations General Assembly in New York on Sept 25 this year

Farush Khan  
Assistant News Editor



MY first "real encounter" with Dr Mahathir was when he visited the petroleum site in Kemaman, Terengganu, as the Deputy Prime Minister.

I had asked him a question on the petroleum industry. I believed he didn't like it and gave a cynical reply. At least that was what I thought.

My attempt to get a different reply from him only resulted in unwanted attention from members of his entourage.

After covering his functions quite regularly in later years when he was already the Prime Minister, I realised Dr Mahathir can be very approachable and friendly. Apart from being sharp, he also has a great sense of humour.

At a packed Press conference in Felda Jengka some time in the 90s, Dr Mahathir had just finished answering a string of questions, from political to development issues, when I said: "Datuk Seri, can I now take you to Timor Timur?"

I was sure he knew I had wanted to ask on the problems in that country then, but instead of waiting for my question, he told me in heavy Kedah accent: "Nak pi pi la ... (You can go ...). The entire hall burst with laughter.

There are times, he can be "jokingly threatening".

At a Press conference at the Kepala Batas airport in Alor Star, in the 90s also, he looked at me and said: "Ha ... you korek lagi" (Ha ... you are probing again) when I asked him on calls by Umno members for the replacement of a State leader.

I must also admit that Dr Mahathir has tremendous energy. One evening, some time in 1996, while covering his visit to Mecca, I had the opportunity to join him to perform the *sa'at* (a religious obligation involving seven rounds of brisk walking between two points called Safa and Marwah which are about 300m apart).

Following closely, I could not help thinking whether at 70 years of age, he could go through the hectic pace.

To my surprise he not only completed it with ease, but early next morning while many members of his entourage were still preparing inside the hotel, Dr Mahathir had already left in a car for Jeddah, an hour's drive from Mecca.

Even some of his close aides were left behind. My worst experience was when I was left alone overnight in Medina by Dr Mahathir and his 35-member entourage a few days prior to that.

Just like the rest, after two nights in Medina, I received a note from his aide placed at the door of my hotel room that the team was leaving for Riyadh, at 8.30pm.

Almost all of us then entered the Masjid Nabawi (the Mosque of the Prophet). I took the opportunity to recite the Quran until after the *Isyak* prayers.

When I returned to the Oberoi Hotel at 7.15pm, I froze when I discovered none of those from the entourage was around anymore and almost fell on my knees when I was told by a Malaysian official, who was based in Medina, that they had all left in the Prime Minister's private jet.

I spent the night looking at the stars in the open space outside the mosque after successfully pleading with an airline staff to let me fly early next morning.

I refused to book into the hotel for two reasons — the room rate was RM900 a night and even if I did, I feared missing the flight again.

It was in Riyadh when I learnt that at the time when I "almost fainted", Dr Mahathir and the rest were actually in one of the other blocks of the Masjid Nabawi.

I would have been on the same private jet had someone from the entourage come to inform me.

