



# A much-loved boss

**NST 31/10/2003 - 62-65 PRECISE**

*Calm and collected. Punctual. Disciplined. Hard working. Humble. These are but some of the traits that come to mind when his staff describe what it is like working for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir*

*Mohamad. FIRDAUS ABDULLAH writes.*



**Datuk Hashim Makaruddin,**  
Special Assistant to the Prime Minister

"HE IS VERY EASY AND SIMPLE TO work for. Maybe others find it hard to cope with his speed and meticulousness but as far as I'm concerned, I have no problem with his working style and speed. You must know that I served Tun Daim Zainuddin as his Press secretary before I joined Dr Mahathir in 1991 in the same capacity," Datuk Hashim Makaruddin (right), the Prime Minister's Special Assistant says of his boss.

Having served Dr Mahathir for about 13 years now, Hashim feels it is easy working for Dr Mahathir because he only requires his staff to do exactly what they were hired for, with full commitment, of course.

"We have very strong feelings for him. It is sad to think that he'll be leaving but I also realised he has to retire one day. When he first made the announcement, it came as a shock as nobody knew about it, but now after so many months, we have accepted the fact. I think he is the hardest working Malaysian ... we will miss him.

"If you are not sure, just ask him. After some time, we understood him. He is a person who knows almost everything, he knows a lot ... he writes his own speeches ... the speeches are entirely his, so in that sense it is easy for us.

"After some time we were able to read his facial and body expressions. When he's not very happy with you, the remarks could be very short but would be so sharp that you would be pondering over it the whole day," Hashim revealed, asserting that spelling mistakes in the speech rarely escaped Dr Mahathir's eyes.

Does the Prime Minister listen to views and suggestions from his staff?

"Yes, if you can convince and impress him, he will take your suggestion, but if you just



complain without supporting your argument, then you won't have his ears.

"If you justify your case he will listen and consider ... that is the Dr Mahathir I know. He is also forgiving when you admit your mistakes ... but make sure you don't repeat the mistake because he is very meticulous and remembers almost everything he says or what is said to him."

For Hashim, the toughest and most testing time for Dr Mahathir was during the initial stages of the 1997/98 financial crisis and the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He revealed how Dr Mahathir, while on an official three-nation visit to Latin America, had to strategise to defend Malaysia against the onslaught of currency manipulators.

"We were on an official visit to Cuba, Chile and Argentina. Everywhere we went, the Western wire-agency journalists were questioning him about the ringgit and everytime Dr Mahathir said something, the ringgit depreciated further.

"He was in constant consultation with

Bank Negara ... trying to work out a strategy.

"He has always been very calm, steady in the face of difficulties and problems. I think that's how he comes up with solutions. He is not hasty. I've not seen him wearing a tired, stressful or shocked look.

"He has sacrificed a lot for the nation. Even when he returns home from overseas assignments and visits at 5 or 6am, he'll still be in the office before 8am. When we are on official visits overseas, I think even the journalists assigned to cover him complain of the taxing schedule.

"During an official trip to the Silicon Valley (in the US) to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor, an American Secret Service agent assigned to protect Dr Mahathir was perplexed at his stamina and vigour, despite the fact that it was Ramadan and Dr Mahathir was fasting.

"The SS guys just couldn't believe it for the simple reason that they were already feeling tired, while a more than 70-year-old man was still pushing ahead ..." Hashim said.

How is Dr Mahathir so accommodating of the Press?

"He reads a lot and is always abreast of things happening throughout the world. He follows regional and international developments very closely and as such is always prepared to face the media. As you know, he is very simple and this is often reflected in the way he expresses his thoughts.

"The foreign Press normally don't like what he says but they like to attend his Press conferences. Most recently in New York (during the United Nations General Assembly), we had journalists telling him that a voice representing the developing and poor countries would be lost with his resignation."

"It is sad when people misunderstand him; what he has done so far is for the nation and its future. The Malays in particular must thank him, for he is an effective leader who has lifted the Malay community on the world stage."



**Sufi Yusoff, assistant Press secretary**

"As a boss, Dr Mahathir is very quiet and reserved. Contrary to his public image as a talkative person, he doesn't engage in 'empty talk' with his staff. Requests, orders and instructions would be brief and specific.

"When I first reported for duty as the Prime Minister's assistant Press secretary in February 1998, Dr Mahathir's first words after welcoming me were 'this is a heavy responsibility, *di sini tak dak cuti-cuti*'.

"I think those words speak a lot of what Dr Mahathir is, as a boss and as a leader who leads by example.

"The responsibility of serving Dr Mahathir is heavy but his energy and seriousness in carrying out his duties as the Prime Minister with extraordinary focus makes our sacrifices minute," said Sufi.

Having served Dr Mahathir for the last five years, the former *New Straits Times* journalist, who was offered the privilege to serve Dr Mahathir during his final years as the Prime Minister, takes it as a great honour.

Describing the Prime Minister as a remarkable person with extraordinary self

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The progress of women in our country should not only be measured against academic criteria, job, social and economic status or their political roles, but equally important is their spirituality.

— At the 20th Women's Day celebrations, August 1982.

Family and career are equally important ... not only for women, but men, too.

— At the 20th Women's Day celebrations, August 1982.



# Dr M's strong will

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confidence and vigour, Sufi remembers clearly moments and instances when the Prime Minister proved that there was no substitute for planning and hard work.

"What I admire most is his super-strong will and the resolve to succeed," Sufi said in an interview.

Repeatedly appearing lost for words, Sufi paused when asked what it is that he admired most about the Prime Minister.

"I wonder how he maintains his cool and composure during 'turbulence'. That is something which baffles me until now. The way he handled the double crisis — the financial and domestic political disturbance — is a classic example of what Dr Mahathir is made of. He didn't have much sleep, everything was on his shoulders ... or rather on top of his head at that time, I didn't think anyone could possibly have that kind of drive. I think most people would quit the job because I don't think you can take that kind of pressure easily.

"But he just went against the odds ... at that point we also had the *Reformasi* demonstrators. I suppose it was the worst time for any leader. You have domestic problems and external pressure on your currency and the nation's finances and assets.

"There were forces within and from outside trying to push the Government out ... and he withstood all that came his way.

"While he proved to a lot of people that he was right and Malaysia had the independence to chart its way forward, his desire and commitment of not wanting to leave the country in a mess is what makes me admire him more.

"He made sure everything was put back in place and today, we are all benefiting from that wisdom. He has proven that he was right about so many things," Sufi recalled, adding that Dr Mahathir had taught him to be critical, analytical and to be rid of his fear of trying out unconventional approaches and methods in life.

Relating the way how the PM toiled daily to understand trade and financial charts and figures and finally prove international financial gurus and institutions that they were wrong, Sufi said the Prime Minister's burning desire to succeed is complemented by his impeccable discipline.

How does he think Dr Mahathir should be remembered by the future generation?

"How they remember him is one thing but the greatest tribute to him would be how we can live up to what he has been fighting for. The greatest legacy of all would be to live up to his expectations. If we want to remember him in a good way, then we must 'walk the path that he has shown'.

"You could just remember him as a great statesman but if you don't live up to his expectations, then it doesn't matter much to him; his sacrifices for the country and the people should not be left to go to waste.

"The greatest gift you can give to the man is to ensure that his

## Sgt-Maj Roslan Othman, close escort since August 1981

HAVING practically tailed Dr Mahathir for the past 22 years in his capacity as the Prime Minister's close escort, 45-year-old police Sgt-Maj Roslan Othman (right) has asked for optional retirement after Dr Mahathir retires.

Roslan, who joined Dr Mahathir as a newly-married 23-year-old police constable, is not opting for retirement to just allocate more time for his family ... he has other reasons.

"I'm opting to retire because if Dr Mahathir still needs me after his retirement, in whatever capacity, I would be free from other official obligations.

"I've spent most of my time with Dr Mahathir, and without doubt he is a role model for all Malaysians. Others may not know the person but Dr Mahathir is a simple, kind-hearted man with a very high level of discipline.

"The one thing I admire most in him is his punctuality ... no matter if it's a president or a friend, Dr Mahathir never keeps anyone waiting.

"Maybe he developed this trait from his early days and later on as a doctor. He appreciates time as though there is no tomorrow," Roslan said.

How is Dr Mahathir as his boss for more than 22 years?

"He is always punctual, never shouts at his staff even if they had done something wrong, always calm. He simply can't accept 'I don't know', 'I don't think so', 'Cannot' and other negative phrases from anyone unless the person has really tried his best.

Roslan, or better known as Abang Lan among journalists, has sacrificed much time serving Dr Mahathir but his responsibility and affection for "Datuk" is also shared by his wife and children.

"They have been very supportive although I hardly have time for them. There were times when friends and relatives asked me *apa faedah buat semua ini* ... obviously they don't understand the privilege of serving a man like him."

For Roslan, the most shocking moment in his life was when Dr Mahathir experienced chest pains, which eventually led to his heart surgery in the late 80s.

"If I'm not mistaken, it was in 1989. This was at the old Seri Perdana in Jalan Tunku, Kuala Lumpur. Dr Mahathir seemed fine to me but shortly after dinner, Datin (Dr Siti Hasmah) called me and said Dr Mahathir was experiencing chest cramps and asked me to take him to the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital.

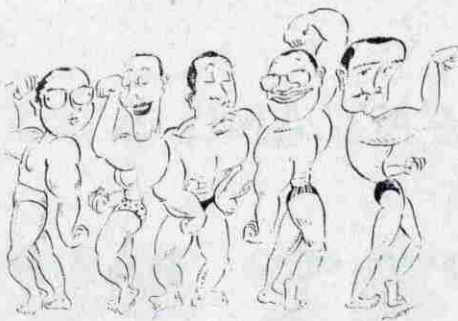
"Dr Mahathir was in pain but he refused to go to hospital saying '*saya tak dak apa-apa ... cuma sakit sikit saja*' but eventually after the director of the KLGH came, we brought him to hospital.

"It was later confirmed that he had suffered a mild attack and required a bypass. This was another instance when Dr Mahathir showed his leadership qualities.

"There were numerous suggestions of the best hospitals and specialists from around the world to conduct the surgery but Dr Mahathir said that if he was to be operated on, it must be done in the Government hospital itself ... by local surgeons.

"He said something like 'Who will trust our hospitals and doctors if I as

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Parting is always a sad thing. Having been with the party for 21 years as the Prime Minister and president of the party, and having associated almost my whole or three-quarters of my lifetime with the party, of course I felt rather sad...

— On why he was overwhelmed by emotion when announcing his resignation in June 2002.

We are very happy (with the decision) although from the start we were of the view that the islands belong to us.

— When the International Court of Justice awarded ownership of Sipadan and

It is better to have a percentage of something than to have 100 per cent of nothing.

— On the principle of multi-racial co-operation, December 2002.

Before we had no problems with girls wearing skirts and boys wearing shorts, especially for games. Now boys are forbidden from wearing shorts, even for playing games, and even games are discouraged.

— On Islamic practices introduced into the school to the extent that non-Muslims were alienated, December 2002.



# 'He can walk the talk'

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On one hand maybe I have had not much time for the family. On the other hand, I just wonder if I'm not the PM, would I have the privilege to help plan a vision (for the country). I'd certainly like to enjoy a little bit of family life.

— On being head of a family, July 2001.

Malaysia will not use nuclear power and we hope others will also not build nuclear power plants.

— Expressing his distrust of nuclear power, June 2001.

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the Prime Minister didn't'. Dr Mahathir, as Roslan explains, is also a very humble person.

"When we are on visits outside the city, Dr Mahathir doesn't like loud sirens to accompany his entourage. He would ask us to inform the outriders to switch off the sirens once we are out of traffic-congested area. "Kita jangan kacau orang lain ... pakai bila perlu saja" ... we heard that remark once and that was enough to understand him."

The sudden demise of tycoon Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad and his wife together with the pilot in a helicopter crash was one of the moments which brought tears to Dr Mahathir, who had high hopes for the tycoon.

"He cried openly when we were at Tan Sri Yahaya's house in Marang (Terengganu) during the funeral. It was so moving that most of those present also couldn't control their emotions."

**Datuk Mohammad Ali, ADC, since 1978**

KNOWN merely as "Pak Ali" to most who have come close to Dr Mahathir since 1978, Deputy Commissioner of Police Datuk Mohammad Ali is one of his longest serving security personnel.

He has treasured memories of 25 years serving the man who is admired by many. "He is a very simple person to work for because he understands our responsibilities. I have not faced any problems in taking care of his security all these years simply because he adapts well to the various situations but most importantly, he is a very disciplined leader."

"Time is more precious than gold and as everybody knows, he is always punctual. His pace is remarkable and whatever that he embarks on is carried out with great passion and diligence," Pak Ali said of his boss.

The Prime Minister, who may seem serious or "fierce" to many, is actually humble and loving, especially when it comes to children.



**THE PRIME MINISTER'S MEN:** Pak Ali (seated) together with Dr Mahathir's long-serving bodyguards (from left) Fazilah, Malik, Pak Ismail, Roslan and Adnan

"Whenever he sees children among the crowd waiting to greet him or at the shopping malls during his weekend book-buying sprees, Dr Mahathir would always stop to greet or hug them."

His other passion is horse riding. Many also do not know that Dr Mahathir can fly small aircraft.

"That was a long time ago before he started riding horses. I used to accompany him on those flights, from the Sungai Besi airport. Later, he switched to horse riding."

According to Pak Ali, Dr Mahathir has many good traits which should be emulated by all, especially his consistency, strong resolve in doing things that he believes in, his self-confidence and most importantly, his discipline.

Anybody can talk and preach about all the good values in life, but to "walk the talk" is a totally different matter.

"Dr Mahathir walks the talk and I think this is one of his strongest values which enabled him to steer us to where we are today."

Pak Ali revealed that while abroad, either during holidays or on official duty, Dr Mahathir would make it a point to drop by at the malls to check if any Made-In-Malaysia products were sold there.

"You could see his joy whenever he finds our products. Sometimes, he would call and show me the items and say that we could do better."

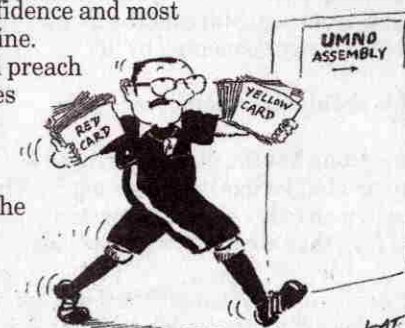
"That is Dr Mahathir, a perfectionist who believes in constant improvement."

Pak Ali, who extended his contract with the police after his retirement three years ago, plans to stop working after Dr Mahathir leaves office today.

"The years I've spent with Dr Mahathir have been the most important part of my life."

I'm proud of having served a man who has contributed so much to Malaysians. As a boss, he is humble yet stern, and has never shouted or yelled at any of us," he said.

For Pak Ali, the day Dr Mahathir had a heart attack in 1989 was



the most challenging and exhaustive period. "God willing, he came out of it safely. He was very strong mentally and this aided in his fast and remarkable recovery. In less than a month after the operation, Dr Mahathir was back in office ... I think that is another record."

"It will be very difficult for anyone to emulate him," Pak Ali concluded.

**Ismail Manaf, 57  
Close escort since 1978**

"ALL these years I have never heard Dr Mahathir complain he was tired or lazy. He is an extraordinary man with a will of steel and I do not think we can find another Dr Mahathir anytime in the future," Ismail said of his boss of 25 years.

Better known as Pak Mail, he has been one of Dr Mahathir's bodyguards since 1978 when he was Deputy Prime Minister. Although Pak Mail retired at the age of 55 two years ago, his service was extended by Dr Mahathir.

"As a boss, Dr Mahathir is a gem of a man who understands our (bodyguard) duties well. While security is vital, Dr Mahathir also expects us not to be rough with people while carrying out our responsibilities."

"He doesn't like to see people being pushed away by his guards. Serving Dr Mahathir is a breeze as the Prime Minister is a very simple man who treats everyone with respect."

"He has never yelled at any of us. I can't recall even a single moment when he had raised his voice ..."

According to Pak Mail, the most taxing period during his tenure with Dr Mahathir was during the constitutional crisis involving the Rulers.

"The situation was critical at that time because the issue involved Sultans and was very sensitive. I remember we had to double the Prime Minister's security personnel after a death threat."

"As expected, Dr Mahathir just brushed

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# Driving with the PM

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it aside and continued with his duties," he revealed.

Pak Mail, who has six grown-up children, feels Dr Mahathir is a simple person to work for as he leads by example.

He said Dr Mahathir would buy "all kinds" of books and magazines ... even those about landscaping and flowers.

"Among all the trips with Dr Mahathir, the trip to Antarctica is the most memorable ... it's historic for me," the greying tough guy said.

Asked about his plans after Dr Mahathir's retirement on Friday, he said: "Datuk and Datin (Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah) are like my parents. I thank God for allowing me to serve them. I wish the "loving couple" would enjoy their freedom after this.

"If at all my services are required, I am ever ready to serve them forever ... I pray that God accords both of them good health," Pak Mail said, with tears swelling in his eyes.

### Mohd Shawal Agos, Driver

MOHD SHAWAL AGOS has been driving Dr Mahathir around for the past 22 years.

Speaking candidly about his experiences, Mohd Shawal said: "Once, while driving him, I asked Dr Mahathir if he was not afraid of being critical of the US since the Americans are a powerful lot and Dr Mahathir's reply was, 'Buat apa nak takut? Kita cakap benda betul' (Why be afraid when you are telling the truth?)."

"That made me understand him more as a person, and personally I've learned a lot from him.

"For instance, during my early days after joining him in 1982, Dr Mahathir told me I must adhere to traffic regulations and even asked me to park properly when we were on unofficial outings. For him, being the Prime Minister was no excuse for breaking the law, even when parking," said Shawal, (better known as "Wak").

The 52-year-old former Public Works Department driver is full of respect and gratitude for Dr Mahathir, whom he describes as a "down to earth" person.

"He loves cars and enjoys driving around whenever he can find time from his ever busy schedule.

"Normally it would be on Sundays. We would leave Kuala Lumpur (Putrajaya for the last four years) early and Dr Mahathir would take the wheel and either cruise along the highway or drive around the city.

"He also liked to visit construction sites of important development projects such as the KLIA, KLCC and, of course, Putrajaya from Day One," Shawal explained, about his boss of about 22 years.

Dr Mahathir also takes notes of the things that he sees during his driving sessions and acts on them, including streetlights not in order.

"Once he asked me to drive him to Dataran Merdeka. Once there, he started counting the number of tourist buses parked there.

"On another occasion when Dr Mahathir was driving towards the Karak Highway, we got stuck in a traffic jam.

"While one would naturally look for an alternative route, Dr Mahathir endured the congestion for about an hour just to ascertain the reason ... I think he also took down some notes.

"There are many more such incidents and instances. All these have served as a good lesson to me."

He also said Dr Mahathir would pay for parking fees imposed on his private car without asking any questions.

"Once a toll collector was shocked to see that the person paying for the RM1 charge was the Prime Minister himself. The girl immediately asked Dr Mahathir to proceed and refused to accept the RM1 ... which left both Dr Mahathir and myself smiling broadly."

For Shawal, Oct 31 will be a sad day but he agrees that Dr Mahathir needs all the rest he can get.

"He has sacrificed his entire life for us and I'm so happy to have served him and contributed to the nation in my own way."

### Mohamad Nazri Sulaiman, 36 Prime Minister's office boy since 1996.

"ALTHOUGH I'm just an office boy, I'm proud to be the office boy to Dr Mahathir not only because he is the Prime Minister but because he is a man of honour and wisdom.

"He is a very humble and simple man who treats people with respect," he said.

While Dr Mahathir is naturally a disciplined, hardworking and no-nonsense person, Nazri feels happy working for the Prime Minister as "he sets the standards and leads by

example".

Being in the Prime Minister's office by 7.30am daily, Nazri revealed that Dr Mahathir would be in his seat by 7.50am on any working day and start his day by reading the newspaper.

"The first newspaper he reads without fail is the *New Straits Times* and later on he would continue with his work. Dr Mahathir hardly eats or drinks in the office unless he attends meetings or entertains visitors.

"His favourite drink is *Nescafe O*," Nazri says, stressing that Dr Mahathir would normally return to Seri Perdana for lunch with Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

How is the boss in the office?



"He's a very straightforward person. If there is anything which is not to his liking he would tell me and I won't repeat such things. So far he has never shouted or yelled at me, or anyone for the matter.

"It's been a pleasure serving him because he makes you feel comfortable. This has been a once-in-a-lifetime experience for

me.

"I'm sad he is leaving but I respect his decision. Maybe he needs the rest because Dr Mahathir is truly a hardworking person."

■ The writer is NST's Staff Correspondent at Putrajaya



SHAWAL: 'I'm so happy to have served him and contributed to the nation in my own way'

I think I will stay with the party (Umno). I want to ensure that the party continues to win. So, I will have more time to go down and meet people.

— Of his plans after retirement, October 2002.