

# I keep my opinions to myself, says Dr Mahathir

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is relaxed and jokes a lot these days, but his humour can be as barbed as ever, as he shows in this interview with HISHAMUDDIN AUN, MANJA ISMAIL, AZIZI OTHMAN and WAN HAZMIR BAKAR.

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**A**S Prime Minister for 22 years from 1981, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was seen as a stern no-nonsense personality, seldom joking in public, always blunt and speaking his mind.

But those who knew him in his private moments, with friends or party leaders, found him to be a bit of a prankster who would crack jokes and laugh a lot.

These days, 19 months after retirement, Dr Mahathir openly displays the humorous side that the public rarely saw.

In a one-hour interview with senior *Berita Harian* editors, Dr Mahathir touched on various subjects, including his continued phobia about eating fish, his equally busy wife's "anti-social" addiction to SMS and mobile phones (which he still does not know how to use), speculation that he still wields great influence over the Government and fair-weather friends who stay away from him now that he is no longer in power.

Dr Mahathir is busy with his memoirs, travelling overseas for speaking engagements but people still come to see him, seeking political advice and asking for contracts.

So what does Dr Mahathir miss most in retirement?

"I sometimes have views on certain subjects but as someone who has no power, I cannot do anything with my opinions but to keep them to myself," the former Prime Minister said, smiling.

He acknowledged that there were times at conferences or in media interviews when questions were phrased to gauge whether his views contradicted those of the administration of his hand-picked successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"When asked such questions, I explain that when I retired, I promised myself and my friends that I would not interfere, that I would not express views which would create problems for the Government, whether I agreed (with the policies of the administration) or not.

"Recently, Lee Kuan Yew (former Singapore Prime Minister) asked me the same question. I told him that I did not interfere. It is the right of

the Government to do what it has to do," he said, dismissing comments by some quarters that he still has influence over the Government.

"I saw Anwar (Ibrahim) on television (on the BBC's *HARDtalk* programme) saying I still pulled the strings in this Government. Never. If I pulled the strings, there would be no changes. But we see that policies have changed.

"If people want to say otherwise, it's up to them. I cannot stop people from saying what they want," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the present administration had the right to make whatever changes it felt necessary. "I am no longer Prime Minister and I have no right to say or do anything," he said.

But there were still those who came to him asking for political advice or help to get contracts.

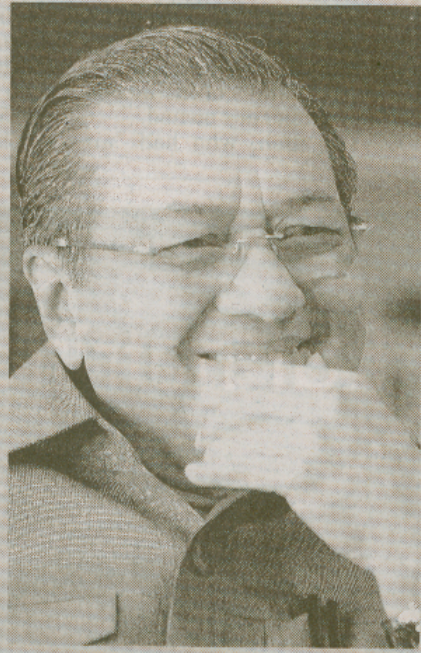
For those seeking advice, he never talks on specifics but advises them that his biggest fear is corruption in politics.

"I tell them that political support gained through corrupt practice can only destroy us, destroy Malaysia. I remind them of Malay history, how they pawned their own country for wealth. Malays must not accept corruption.

"Although there are those who accuse me of corruption, let them. I never received an enormous salary when I was Prime Minister. I started with only RM8,000 — a huge sum," he joked.

"But there were other facilities provided by the Government for which I was grateful. Even today, the Government is kind to me. I have aides and they assist me. Petronas also provides me with assistants to help me with my work so that I have no problem carrying out my duties or feeding myself. How much can I eat anyway," he said.

As for those who come seeking his influence in swinging contracts their way, Dr Mahathir said his role, as before, was just to be a "postman".



DR MAHATHIR: Still phenomenally busy

"There are those who believe that because I am adviser to Proton and Petronas, I can give them something. But if they pass me anything, I act as a postman and give it to the relevant people. I say that there is this request and it is up to you to decide what you want to do with it.

"Even when I was Prime Minister, I never dictated that they should do anything for anyone. That is why there are some family members who to this day do not talk to me because they did not get what they asked for.

"There are also friends who are upset. I told them that I am in no position to give but they insisted. I said 'OK, if you insist, I will pass it on and if you get it, you get it. If you don't, you don't'.

"Some who got it thought it was because of me. But it was not because of me. I was a postman but people thought I had the power (to influence decisions). It's the same now. I tell them that I am not in Government and have no power but they insist that I have influence. (So, I say) OK, give it to me and I will pass it on," he laughed.

Despite retirement, he finds no respite. Not much has changed for the former Prime Minister who has always been known for having boundless energy, working in the office until late, attending

functions at night and being the earliest to arrive at work the next day.

His phobia about fish developed as a child when his elders told him that fish-eaters would turn into worms.

He eats in moderation, is careful about his health but finds that these days he has even less time for his favourite pastimes such as riding.

He travels overseas a lot, giving talks at conferences in China, Japan, Europe, the Middle East, and jokes that now, people who "like to hear" what he says attend.

Dr Mahathir dismissed notions that he gets paid lucrative sums on the lecture circuit, like ex-US President Bill Clinton. "Most times I do not get paid at all. Or they just pay for my hotel," he says,

saying there is great interest in how Malaysia, with its multi-racial and multi-religious population, and as an Islamic country, has succeeded through moderation.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether some of those who clamoured to see him when he was Prime Minister now avoided him.

"There are some of them. When you are no longer Prime Minister, they do not care about you, they do not meet me. But it does not affect me. Everyone has genuine friends and fair weather friends.

"When I was Prime Minister and went back to Alor Star, thousands would gather to meet me, some from other States and many with envelopes (containing proposals or requests). Now, when I go back, only a small number — the close ones — come to see me. Those who did not get any political positions do not come at all," he said.

"My experience has taught me that in politics, there are friends who will remain friends and enemies who will remain enemies. If we help people, it does not mean they will help us. Some that you help may even stab you in the back.

"This is the reality. I accept it but I will relate some of this in my memoirs," he said. — *Berita Harian*