

When will Dr M tell all?

By Syed Nadzri, New Sunday Times, 6 November 2005

Looks like it's going to be a while more before we get to read Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's memoirs. The life story, easily one of the most eagerly-anticipated publications of our time, is not about to be completed anytime soon. The man himself said it.

"I have only finished a few chapters and these too only cover the period before I became Prime Minister," he mentioned in an interview last week.

That's definitely a long way to go but, considering his dynamic character and most eventful career, most people are sure it's going to be worth the wait.

It has been exactly two years since Dr Mahathir stepped down after 22 years as Prime Minister.

And he didn't look a year older when I interviewed him last Monday about a pet project that's coming up next month — the Perdana Global Peace Forum.

He is president of the Perdana Leadership Foundation, the main organisers of the inaugural forum to be held in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 15-17.

Dr Mahathir was also on top of the world that day. Literally. And that's because the interview took place at his Petronas office on the 86th floor of one of the twin towers.

Wherever you stand in this office, you have a spectacular view of the Kuala Lumpur skyline right up to Rawang — like you were on an aeroplane. It was breathtaking.

The focus of the interview, conducted by me and Berita Harian deputy group editor Datuk Manja Ismail, was the forum.

But, as a matter of catching up with the elder statesman, we did ask him about many other things which were mostly off the record.

Dr Mahathir said the slow progress of the memoirs was because he made it a point to draft everything himself — no ghost-writers, no dictation. And he writes long-hand.

"I cannot do it any other way," he said. "If I were to record everything by only taping what I say over a microphone and let another person do the writing, it might affect continuity. So I might as well do it this way."

His assistants say he has a hawk's eye for detail and his facts and historical accounts are checked and double-checked against existing records.

He has a few people doing that for him, just as he has a team taking care of the editing.

His assistants also say he still runs a tight schedule but normally keeps Thursdays and Fridays free of appointments to concentrate on his memoirs.

The publication is eagerly- awaited because memoirs are really hard to come by from the country's leaders.

A memoir, by the way, is different from a biography which is essentially someone's life story written by and through the eyes of somebody else.

There are plenty of biographies of our politicians around, especially during election seasons written by mercenary writers. And they normally come with predictable titles such as "So-and-so ... Wira Bangsa dan Negara".

Sadly, none of Dr Mahathir's three predecessors published their memoirs. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first Prime Minister, came closest with his *May 13: Before and After*, published in 1969.

But as the title suggests, the book only chronicles events leading to the May 13 racial riots and what happened subsequently. It was not a comprehensive record of personal history.

After his retirement, Tunku also came out with *Viewpoints* in 1978 and *Lest We Forget* five years later.

Though these were records of personal experiences and observations, they were nothing more than compilations of his weekly column in a newspaper.

The Tunku, by the way, also had a pictorial biography produced by Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard several years ago.

Among the other notable memoirs are *From Village Boy to Mr Opposition* by Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Koon, *Memoirs of a Menteri Besar* by former Perak MB Tan Sri Mohammad Said, *The Second University* (Kassim Ahmad), *Dark Clouds at Dawn* (former activist-journalist Said Azahari), former Pas stalwart Tan Sri Asri Muda's *Meniti Arus* (*Balancing Against the Tide*) and former Wanita Umno chief Tan Sri Aishah Ghani's *Memoir Seorang Pejuang* (*Memoirs of a Fighter*).

It would have been great to have Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Datuk Harun Idris, Tun Ghafar Baba and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib in the above list. Surely.

Anyway, as for Dr Mahathir's memoirs, it would be most interesting to find out about his early years, including at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star.

I was told that his political inclinations had already surfaced very clearly then, when among other things he led a movement of students pasting anti-British and anti-Malayan Union posters all over town.

Another phase of his life we would want to read about would be his university days in Singapore and private medical practice in Alor Star where he and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah set up Maha Clinic in 1957, the first Malay doctors to do so.

There were few private practitioners in the Kedah capital then, like Dr Lim Joo Hai, Dr Arasu and Dr Sundrarajan.

As a boy, I was one of his patients at Maha Clinic in Pekan Melayu and used to be in awe of his Pontiac, which my friends and I used to call "the longest car in the world".

The other cornerstones of Dr Mahathir's life everyone is anxiously waiting to read about include:

- His open letter to the Tunku just after the May 13 riots, which criticised the manner Tunku ran the country. For this, he was sacked from the party. The letter, which was widely distributed throughout the country, had Dr Mahathir addressing himself as patik, a Malay court language meaning I or me;
- his book the Malay Dilemma, which formed the basis of the New Economic Policy in 1971;
- how Hussein Onn selected him to be his deputy in 1976 over two more senior Umno vice-presidents, Ghafar and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah;
- his controversial years as Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister where, among other things, he was booed at one function when he came to address university students, and also the hot episode when he reportedly said the Malaysian authorities would "shoot" on sight Vietnamese refugees entering the country;
- his ascendancy to Prime Ministership followed by his deteriorating relationship with Musa, his deputy;
- his invitation to and acceptance by Abim leader Anwar Ibrahim to join Umno;
- his drive to produce a national car and to turn Malaysia into a manufacturing economy;

- the tumultuous years after Musa quit the Cabinet and the challenge for the party leadership mounted by Tengku Razaleigh and his Team B;
- the time when Umno was declared illegal by the courts;
- how several senior judges were made to face a tribunal and subsequently sacked;
- the quadruple bypass he went through after a heart attack in 1989;
- the meteoric rise of Anwar and the fallout that followed;
- how he went against convention to tackle the Asian financial crisis and his relationship with Tun Daim Zainuddin;
- his decision to retire and why he named Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor;
- his post-retirement period; and,
- his relationship with foreign leaders like Bob Hawke, Jacques Chirac, Margaret Thatcher, Fidel Castro, Fidel Ramos, Suharto, Robert Mugabe, Paul Keating, John Howard, George Bush and Lee Kuan Yew.

Lee, particularly, had quite a lot to say about Dr Mahathir in his own memoirs *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*.

Here's an excerpt: "Mahathir was candid about his deep anti-Singapore feelings. He recounted how, as a medical student in Singapore, he had directed a Chinese taxi driver to the home of a lady friend, but had been taken to the servants' quarters of this house.

"It was an insult he did not forget. Singapore Chinese, he said, looked down upon the Malays."

Surely, there will be Dr Mahathir's take on this in his memoirs. I just can't wait.