

THE stern face of Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been said to send chills down people's spines. Together with his no-nonsense approach to things and penchant for speaking his mind, it is hardly surprising people think of him as a fierce and difficult person to deal with.

Yet, ask any of the many people who see him on a regular basis and they will quickly dispel the notion of him being an irritable and fussy man devoid of any sense of humour.

Contrary to that, he is quite quick to crack jokes and make people around him feel comfortable.

Some of the best people to record these lighter moments of Dr Mahathir are, of course, journalists who trailed him virtually everywhere he goes.

While a large part of his witty comments have unfortunately been left out of reporters' notebooks, many have nevertheless been recorded and seen print.

Thankfully, the job of taking down such moments is made much easier due to the close relationship between Dr Mahathir and the press, which often results in journalists themselves being a favourite "tar-

party was accepted into the Barisan Nasional fold
March 25: Twenty Supreme Court and High Court judges met to overcome the existing tension between the judiciary and the executive.
March 26: *The Star* resumed publication after 149 days' suspension by the Government following the ISA crackdown

His forbidding looks can turn a brave man into jelly. But behind that stern façade is a quick mind who loves a good joke ... and taking the mickey out of lesser mortals, reports LEONG SHEN-LI.

get" of jokes and jibes, some of which border on sarcasm.

One of the job requirements of journalists is to weed out very important decisions which only he himself makes. These range from setting the dates for general elections to Cabinet appointments to his retirement timetable.

Unfortunately, such a task would often be coupled with the hazard of having to face some very smart remarks when he is not prepared to part with such information.

One good example was in 1999 when Dr Mahathir was in Zimbabwe for the Southern Africa International Dialogue. While he

May 31: Lord President Tun Salleh Abas was suspended for "gross misbehaviour and misconduct" over some breaches of protocol over a letter he had sent to the King on the behalf of Government. A tribunal was set up under deputy lord president Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Omar to hear his case
July 6: Five other Supreme Court



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That wicked sense of humour

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When he became Prime Minister in 1981, he freed practically all political detainees in Kamunting, which was a step in the right direction. But subsequently in *Operasi Lalang* in 1987, there was no reason, as far as I was concerned, to use the Internal Security Act on us.

The use of the ISA is a black mark against Dr Mahathir as he was then the Home Minister. I didn't like what he did, especially when he got a second detention order against me in 1988 after the Ipoh High Court quashed my first detention order. However, I don't hold that against him as he thought what he was doing was right.

But we must give credit where it's due. He has risen from being expelled from Umno to become the Prime Minister and this certainly showed resilience, which must be respected. In that sense, he's a good role model.

Of course, he'll be missed in Parliament. We've had such lively debates together, particularly over (former Dewan Rakyat Deputy Speaker D.P.) Vijandran's tapes.

— Deputy DAP Chairman Karpal Singh

enjoyed the spectacular Victoria Falls, Malaysian journalists who were with him had something else on their minds — When would he call for a general election?

Finally, the question was popped. His answer, in true Dr Mahathir fashion, was: "As long as I'm here (in Zimbabwe), there will be no

judges Tan Sri Wan Suleiman Pawan Teh, Datuk George Seah, Tan Sri Mohamed Azmi Kamaruddin, Tan Sri Eusofee Abdoolcader and Tan Sri Wan Hamzah Mohamed Salleh were also suspended by the King for convening a sitting without authority. The judges had in a special session earlier handed down a restraining order

elections!"

He then went on to say that after visiting Victoria Falls, he would be attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban. Then, Malaysia would be hosting the World Golf Championship and the Formula One, so those dates would also have

against the tribunal from submitting its report to the King. In October, after a tribunal, three were re-instated while two were sacked
July 9: The Bar Council passed a non-confidence motion against Abdul Hamid and called for his resignation and removal
Aug 6/8: Salleh was dismissed by the King

to be written off.

"The press is very clever. You can figure out when the school holidays will be, the suitable Saturdays, *puasa* (fasting month) and Chinese New Year. You calculate and then tell me *-lah*. Then I will hold the elections," he quipped.

Speculation on Cabinet appointments and reshuffles by the press have also generated a wealth of jibes from Dr Mahathir.

After the resignation of Tun Daim Zainuddin as Finance Minister in 2001, Dr Mahathir took over the portfolio. Journalists felt compelled to ask whether he would appoint a second finance minister to assist him in drawing up the 2002 Budget and with other duties.

He answered: "Do you have any proposals?"

He added: "I suspect that the press community does not trust me running the Finance Ministry. They keep on asking me when we are going to make the appointment."

1989
Jan 18: Dr Mahathir was admitted to the KL General Hospital after complaining of chest pains
Jan 24: Dr Mahathir underwent a successful coronary bypass operation at KL General Hospital
Jan 26: Five ISA detainees, including DAP MP Karpal Singh, were released. Karpal Singh had been one of those



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When announcing Daim's resignation earlier, he even "offered" journalists the post. Asked who would be succeeding Daim, Dr Mahathir looked at the reporters before him and said, "If anyone wants?"

Daim's departure from the Cabinet and politics which was kept quiet for a period of time, was a hot issue which was pursued closely by the press. To fend off endless questions, Dr Mahathir came up with some good answers.

Queried about Daim's reasons for going on leave (prior to him resigning), Dr Mahathir said he could have been tired, and added:

"It could be because you people (the press) always disturb him, asking him endless questions and criti-

cising him over the Malaysia Airlines issue."

His jokes were of course not just limited to the ears of journalists. When addressing the public during functions, Dr Mahathir enjoyed peppering his speeches with jokes and witty comments, which made him very interesting to listen to.

During the Malaysian Liver Foundation's Charity Night this year, Dr Mahathir, who is also patron of the organisation, did not have any problems getting the full attention of the audience. Being a doctor himself, it was not surprising that he had a wealth of stories to tell about liver diseases.

Touching on how such diseases are spread, Dr Mahathir talked about the dangers of using the same

pair-of chopsticks to pick up food from common dishes, and offered several "solutions" to such a practice.

"Now of course, restaurants give two pairs of chopsticks. One is used to get food from common dishes to your own plate, and the other to bring the food to your mouth.

"But if only one pair of chopsticks is provided, I was told that you should use one end to pick food from the common dish, and then turn it around and use the other end to put the food in the mouth!" he said.

After a few seconds for some nervous chuckles (traditionally chopsticks are never used in this manner), Dr Mahathir said, "Well, didn't I tell you that I am able to

bluff my way through. That's how I got here!" Everyone had a good laugh.

Dr Mahathir's ability to humorously convey messages allowed him to openly touch on subjects which otherwise would have been difficult to broach.

This style of talking was cleverly used when he gave his last address to the MCA annual general assembly this year.

Building on the *abang-adik* (big brother-small brother) analogy which Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik had used to describe the relationship between MCA and his party a few days earlier, Dr Mahathir managed not only

to make the 2,000-odd delegates tear from laughter, but also implicitly called for the two parties to improve on their ties.

"*Abang tentu sayangkan adik dan adik pula janganlah buat kacau.* (Big brother will certainly love his little brother. And little brother shouldn't cause any mischief)," he said.

Cabinet ministers also have not been spared becoming subjects of his jokes. At the end of his expedition to the Antarctica early last year, which he went with several ministers, he had this to say about the place:

"Antarctica is a good place for holidays and also a good place to despatch one's enemies, terrorists or those whom you don't want around. In the case of my ministers, if they don't perform, I just remove them!"

At the launch of the new National Art Gallery in September 2000, he also took the opportunity to poke fun at one of his longest-serving ministers.

Donning a beret and apron and holding a paint palette, Dr Mahathir happily drew the side profile an Indian member of his Cabinet. He topped it off with the letters "SV". It was Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu. Asked what the price tag of his masterpiece on Samy Vellu was, he replied: "One million."



From left: He was forbidding and seemed devoid of humour when he appeared stern or even downright grumpy; but his audience loved him when he was in a teasing, bantering mood; he was delightful when he was impish and sardonic; and at his most genial, he loved a good joke and a laugh.