

# Behind the headlines

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The media was the key in helping Dr Mahathir communicate his vision, policies, ideas and even reprimands to the nation and the rest of the world. It wasn't an easy job but it was always exciting and worthwhile, as veteran journalists would tell you.

## Datuk Khalid Mohamed, Editor-in-Chief, Utusan Malaysia

THE Prime Minister is probably not aware of this but he actually helped me move ahead in my career.

Dr Mahathir became the Deputy Prime Minister in 1976, the year I started working as reporter in *Utusan Malaysia*, almost 27 years ago. *Utusan* was short of staff and I was sent to cover him even though it was only my first year.

I have to admit that I was so young then - like a *budak takut-takut* (a scared kid) - yet he was very patient with me and put up with my questions. Somehow, there was a rapport and because of the kindness he showed me, I got many exclusive stories for the paper. I remember how I would wait in Parliament until he came out, then I would trail alongside him from the lobby to his car. During that short distance, I would often get a page one lead for the newspaper.

Although he was the DPM, he would take my phone calls. I remember covering the general election in Kelantan and there was emergency rule and the Barisan Nasional had won the election. I called him from Kota Baru and he spoke to me and commented on the victory.

But even though he has been helpful and kind to me, he has scolded me in public for writing something that is not correct. I have to admit that until today, I am afraid of him. I would not dare try to be too familiar with him because of the admiration and respect I have for him. I would not joke with him, I dare not. I believe in keeping a respectful distance. Till today, I always wait for him to make the first move when we meet in public.

His energy and stamina is incredible. I always say that God gave him something extra. He became PM at 55 when most of us are preparing to retire. He is now 78, still strong. Recently, we carried a picture of him playing polo. It's no joke, you know, riding a horse and trying to hit a little ball with a stick, but he can do it.

As for missing him, since he announced his retirement last year, I had already begun missing him. He is so easy to talk to. He has such clarity and his thoughts are so organised that you can just transcribe it directly into your story. He seems to understand what we want. And he is not afraid of controversial issues.

I will miss him most as a journalist. It has been such a pleasure covering him.

## Datuk Chamil Wariya, Senior General Manager, News and Current Affairs, TV3

I first covered Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a young reporter with *Utusan Malaysia* back in 1972. He had just been re-admitted into Umno. He was a guest at a function organised by the Rawang Umno division then headed by Tunku Abdullah Tunku Abdul Rahman, the brother of the Yang Di Pertuanan



The Star's executive editor Datuk Wong Chun Wai (left) with Bernama's Datuk Azman Ujang (right) with Dr Mahathir at the residence of former Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda in February 1990.

Besar Negeri Sembilan.

Dr Mahathir was almost two hours late for the function but to my surprise all the Umno members at the Rawang community hall waited patiently for him.

He came in a taxi from the airport, apologising that the plane was late. He joked that he had expected someone to fetch him from the airport but since no one was there, he had to take a cab. He said he could have decided not to come but he had promised his good friend Tunku Abdullah, so he found his own way to Rawang.

I was a newcomer to journalism and as I listened to Dr Mahathir's political talk for the first time, two things struck me about the man. First, his ability to articulate ideas in layman's terms so that the crowd had no problem understanding what he meant.

Second, he was willing to go against the mainstream views with regard to many Malay and national issues. This was reflected in his response to questions from the floor during the question-and-answer session that followed.

One thing I have discovered in

the numerous exclusive interviews with him is that, contrary to some views, the Prime Minister is willing to take on any question, however tough. In my experience, if you wish to get a good response, you have to make him feel comfortable and once that is achieved, the man is yours.

## Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, Editor-in-Chief, Berita Publishing

NO other Malaysian Prime Minister believes in the power of the press more than Dr Mahathir.

Thus, life was, to put it mildly, never dull if you were the editor of a newspaper or the controller of news at a radio and television station during Dr Mahathir's era. You could rest assured that one reader, listener and viewer would be paying attention to what you published and broadcast.

Dr Mahathir knew his stuff and he would not hesitate to let you know if he thought a report was wrong or misleading. But nothing upset him more than bad headlines. Your reports could be accurate but if your headlines were wrong or misleading, you could expect to



Left: Datuk Khalid Mohamed, Editor-in-Chief of Utusan Malaysia and Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, Editor-in-Chief, Berita Publishing.

hear from him or his press officers.

In 1990, when the inaugural Visit Malaysia Year was launched, the national airlines MAS was in crisis. It did not have sufficient capacity to cope with the upsurge in local and foreign tourists and some of its aircraft types suffered frequent technical problems. Flight delays and cancellations were the norm.

The *New Straits Times* had front-paged the picture of a damaged MAS Boeing 737 aircraft at the Alor Star's Sultan Abdul Halim Airport. The newspaper had contended that the damage to the aircraft's radar dome was the result of poor maintenance.

I was called by Dr Mahathir to his office and we spent 45 minutes "discussing" (for the lack of a better word) the nature of the damage. He contended that it was caused not by poor maintenance but by bird strike. He went on to explain bird strike as if he was an airline pilot or an aircraft engineer.

Nothing in the Press escaped Dr Mahathir's attention - not even the Page Three Girls that the *Malay Mail* used to published some years ago and the cartoons by Datuk Lat and Mdesa. He took them seriously and often commented on them.

No other Prime Minister treated the ordinary journalists, photographers and television crews with greater friendship and concern than Dr Mahathir. He knew what they wanted - good quotes and good pictures.

## Datuk Wong Chun Wai, Executive Editor, The Star

I have covered Dr Mahathir as a journalist for 19 years now. These assignments, including overseas visits, allowed me to have a greater understanding of the Prime Minister. But like many journalists, I

have always wondered where he got his stamina. On a trip to Botswana, many of us, including some officials, wanted to take a nap after a long-haul trip but the Prime Minister insisted on meeting us. There were plenty of such experiences.

But unlike many politicians, Dr Mahathir was not the type to pull a chair at the table to make small talk with reporters. I don't think he believes in idle chatter. He took his work seriously and in a way, we always felt a certain distance between him and the journalists.

But he has certainly been polite, even to reporters who asked irrelevant questions. Still, he can be moody at times. I remember during a trip to Bali, when the Malaysian and Indonesian delegations failed to achieve a particular agreement, he showed his unhappiness.

After a short press conference, he adjourned to a corner and started taking out what appeared to be *kacang putih* and started munching. He did not offer it to any of us. It was only much later that a minister joined him and we could see, from a distance, the uncomfortable silence between them.

My colleagues and I had the opportunity to interview him on Oct 2. He was in talkative mood and it was certainly one of the best conversations that I've had with him. It was a fitting finale for me, in some ways.

I could detect the sadness in his facial expressions when we talked about Anwar Ibrahim. But his love for his wife and family was obvious. His face was radiant when he spoke about Dr Siti Hasmah. We sensed that he wanted to get many things off his chest but time did not permit it. I will certainly miss him.

PAS considers Dr Mahathir's 22-year tenure as very long, one which would surely see the country undergoing great changes. We can assume that in that long time, anyone administering the country would have been capable of implementing development projects. One's stature can only be perceived as extraordinary if he can carry out reforms within a short period, for instance, in the space of one term. We can see the physical development in our country. The question is at what cost have all these projects been carried out? In PAS' opinion, the development is not balanced, between that of physical and that of spiritual growth. In view of the serious social problems among both our youth and adults - even within our corporate sector - it reflects the lack of emphasis placed on the development of humanity. We are waiting to receive a new leader with the high hopes that this will herald in justice, greater political and democratic freedoms, and an end to detention without trial.

- PAS President Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang

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**Datuk Azman Ujang**  
Executive Editor, Bernama

DR Mahathir is undoubtedly the world's most widely-travelled head of government. He has been a hit with the leaders, people and journalists of all the countries that he has visited and it is when appearing in front of the media that he seems in top form.

Dr Mahathir is a reporter's delight and that's why there was always a long queue of media

organisations wanting to interview him wherever he went.

A few years ago, during a visit to a British university, the Indian national head of the university's R&D department told Dr Mahathir that he wished India could have him as its Prime Minister for at least two years to put things right in India!

**Mergawati Zulfakar, Assistant Editor, The Star**

REPORTERS covering Dr Mahathir, often ask his aides: "How is his

SOME time after Nelson Mandela was released from his long incarceration and before South Africa's first general election, a high powered ANC delegation visited Malaysia as guest of the Government. I was lucky to be able to play host to them, many of whom later became Cabinet ministers. I was surprised when, after a long conversation, they wanted to know why I did not support Dr Mahathir, whom they considered to be progressive.

My answer was simple. If the PM practises within the country what he preaches overseas about sovereignty, domination of power, just governance, human rights, press freedom, level playing field and so forth, and at the same time uses the wealth of the nation more for the welfare of the majority of people from various ethnic groups who really need it, then I would certainly have supported him. I am sure many more would have done the same.

Nevertheless, overall, he may well be remembered with pride by many as an illustrious son and a great Prime Minister of Malaysia. Given the present political culture, the successes will shine in the public eye.

— *Parti Rakyat Malaysia President Dr Syed Husin Ali*

# 'How is his mood?'

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mood?"

If the answer is in the negative, we avoid requesting for a press conference unless there is something urgent to ask.

I have experienced enough sarcastic replies from him when he is not in the best of moods. I got a long reply (a lecture is more like it) when I asked a question that obviously upset him during a press conference at Carcosa Seri Negara.

One of his aides came up to me saying, "*Tadi dah cakap* (I told you so)."

Several years ago, there was a press conference by Dr Mahathir at the PWTC in a makeshift cubicle. It was such a tight space that everybody had to squeeze in.

I was standing against the wall and when the press conference was over, one VIP seated next to the PM got up and started to push his way through those nearby and I lost my balance.

As I struggled to stop from falling backwards, I saw Dr Mahathir extending a hand to help me. I managed to keep my balance but I thanked him anyway.

Another thing you have to understand when covering Dr Mahathir is that he sometimes says things in jest. Some of us take him too serious.

For example:

Q. When are you going to appoint a Finance Minister?

A. Anyone of you can apply. Just fill up a form.

And:

Q. Have you decided on the date of election?

A. I am still looking for *ilham*

(inspiration).

In Moscow last year, it snowed one night despite spring being around the corner. Dr Mahathir was on an official visit and mingling with Malaysians after attending a dinner with them.

He saw our group and stopped. After the hellos and how-are-you's, I said: "You seem to bring snow wherever you go."

His reply:

"Yes, I even brought snow when I was in Antarctica."



Datuk Chamil Wariya