

From a nervous start in public life nearly three decades ago when Dr Mahathir was first appointed to the Cabinet, Dr Siti Hasmah has grown in stature and confidence to become the perfect First Lady, writes JUNE H.L. WONG.

HE has been the perfect First Lady, keeping up with the energetic and dynamic Prime Minister every step of the way and never putting a wrong foot. So it will be no surprise that Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, 77, will be as deeply missed by the rakyat as her husband when he retires. Even though she has always been contented to play the supporting role, she has carved her own areas of interest such as women and children's health – as befitting a doctor – and on the international level, she has represented Malaysia at conferences and organisations on women's rights and rural women's economic empowerment and other issues. Her love for badminton and support for the national players at tournaments is also well-known. Visible and articulate, she has certainly made her presence felt without being seen as dominating or calculating. Unlike other first ladies, like Rosalynn Carter or Hillary Clinton, Dr Siti Hasmah has never been accused of interfering with politics or trying to influence her husband.

Yet, she is surely his closest confidante and "pillar of strength", as her son Datuk Mohkzani Mahathir describes her. And according to daughter Datin Paduka Marina, Dr Siti Hasmah, like her husband, views her position and responsibilities as a "kind of national duty".

"She's always given him her 100% support. If she disagrees, she does it privately. I think he tells her most things; his decision to resign last year (which took everyone by surprise) was an exception," says Marina.

Mohkzani calls her "the mother of all mothers" and he is in awe of

His leading lady

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her. But ask Dr Siti Hasmah what policies she might have had a hand in shaping, she will reply: "Not much but I am very happy and satisfied with what I have done."

Her proudest achievements are in helping set up a preparatory course at Intan for the wives of ambassadors and the diplomatic corps and her work with Bakti, the club for the wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers. She promoted the need for such a course after she experienced first hand, the problems among the wives at embassies and high commissions in Europe on a vacation in the late 1970s.

"We were going from one place



The wife behind the successful leader who would hold his hand in an open display of affection (top left), serve him his morning coffee, and follow him to the ends of the earth (in this case, Antarctica). Left: A young Siti Hasmah with her very hirsute husband.

was terrible and I was really sick of it by the time we came back from the trip."

That led her to propose a 10-week course at Intan for the wives to prepare them for their roles overseas. With her husband's support, it got the nod and she herself attended the first course in 1977.

"Our target were the wives of the ambassadors, the military and edu-

to another and I was meeting the wives of the ambassadors and the other members of the diplomatic corps in the embassies.

"There was a host of problems – there was no cooperation or coordination because they had never been properly informed of their roles. It

cation attaches and so on. The course is now compulsory and there are also refresher courses."

The course has made all the difference, she adds, as the wives are now prepared and aware of their roles and responsibilities.

Where Bakti is concerned, it has been instrumental in organising and bringing together the wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers. Dr Siti Hasmah says she and Tun Suhaila Mohd Noah, wife of the late Tun Hussein Onn, who mooted the idea, were both founder members.

The club was formed in 1976 and Dr Siti Hasmah was involved in choosing the name, establishing its constitution and setting up the committee.

"The main objective is to get the wives together, after all they come from all over Malaysia and they don't know (each other)," she explains.

She recalls her own difficulties adjusting when she came from Alor Star after Dr Mahathir was appointed Education Minister in 1974. She was unsure what to do at functions with other Cabinet members and wives present.

"I came across as aloof; not because I was too proud to mix with them because I was a doctor but because I was afraid of breaching protocol. I didn't know what to do until some friends pulled me in," she says.

Bakti is also committed to organising charity events to raise funds for orphans and the disabled. Its members make it a point to visit homes for the underprivileged during all the major festivals.

Dr Siti Hasmah has gone on to encourage the states to have their own version of Bakti headed by the wife of the respective Menteri Besar or Chief Minister.

"I am very watchful over Bakti and I don't allow cliques or factions. There was a tendency towards that in the 1980s, so I had to give a very strong talk to the members."

Bakti was responsible for building the Kompleks Penyayang Bakti in Sungai Buloh, Selangor, where for the last three years it has provided

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Malaysian Cabinet for Lee to retract his statement and apologise. On March 17, Lee instructed his counsel to remove the offending statement and he apologised.
March 31: The KLSE fell by 14.5 points in a single day, the start to a period of plunging stock prices
April 12: Dr Mahathir announced that Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri

Muhammad Muhammad Taib would step down following his two court hearing. Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar was later declared his successor
May 17: Dr Mahathir officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony for Cyberjaya – Malaysia's first intelligent city
May 24: The country experienced its worst episode of haze ever, com-

pounded by the prolonged drought brought on by the El Nino phenomenon. At one point, the Air Pollution Index in Sarawak was at 839, way past the danger level. On July 31, the haze was declared a national disaster. The haze only started to lift in late October
July 26: Dr Mahathir named George Soros as the man responsible for

destabilising South-East Asian currencies
Aug 7: The ringgit started to weaken following the fall of other currencies in Southeast Asia, particularly the baht
Aug 21: Standards and Poor revised its rating for Malaysia's banking system from stable to negative
Aug 22: Dr Mahathir hit out at the

United States for refusing to acknowledge the activities of financial speculator George Soros as "criminal"
Aug 24: Dr Mahathir called Soros a "moron" and refused to meet him, after the latter had indicated an interest to talk to the Premier
Sept 4: Dr Mahathir announced a ban of short selling for 100 share counters at the KLSE. He also said mega pro-

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care and refuge for single mothers, daycare for the elderly and children. It is run by the Social Welfare Department.

A fitting recognition of her work came in the form of the opening of Bakti's own building at Bukit Kiara on Oct 12 which was named after her.

Asked what would make a fitting tribute to Dr Mahathir, Dr Siti Hasmah says he wouldn't want any.



Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali with her disc player containing her French lessons that she travels with.

'We will be around'

"He's a very modest person. He doesn't even want honorary awards from universities but I'm collecting honorary awards from as many universities as possible!" she says, laughing.

Her explanation is delightful as it is mischievous: "I worked so hard for my medical degree, failing every year and doing re-exams every time, so now I'm relaxing and collecting honorary doctorates."

Speaking of exams, she has just sat for one herself; this time on beginner's French.

At 77, she puts younger people to shame with her zest and determination to learn something as difficult as a foreign language. But why French?

"I've always been interested and I'm patron for the International Steering Committee for Rural Women and most of the member countries are African and they speak French," she explains,

adding, however, that she might withdraw from the committee later on.

She is so serious about her French that she sends text messages in French to Marina and expects replies in French too. She also carries a portable DVD player in a pouch so that she can listen to her French lessons on the go.

She studies the language at Multimedia University (MMU) and her lecturers want her to sign up for the intermediate level as well.

"I said hold on; let me clear my nightmare over examinations. My last exam was in 1955, suddenly to get into another exam in 2003, it's a calamity. But I passed so it's okay," she says laughingly.

It looks like her husband will join her as he was spotted buying books on learning French in London recently.

"Actually he studied French in the 1960s and if someone speaks slowly to him in French, he can reply. He helps me with my vocabulary when I get stuck," she reveals.

Not known to the public is that Dr Siti Hasmah was a contract medical

officer with the government and when she retired in 1979 after reaching her maximum salary of RM2,603 ("It was a lot in those days"), she was given only a gratuity but no pension.

"I didn't opt for permanency because I had to give up my gratuity - *banyak tu* - and they would minus 10 years from my years of service which wouldn't have left me with much, so it wasn't worth it."

Her down-to-earth manner is something that strikes a chord with ordinary people and is perhaps an excellent foil to her husband's extremely high standards and ideals.

As an example, Dr Siti Hasmah says that recently the MMU board of trustees wrote to her offering her a monthly allowance of RM3,000 for being the chancellor.

"I said no as I preferred the allowance to be turned into a scholarship for the students instead. When I told my husband, he said I shouldn't do that because that meant I was accepting the money, even if I was giving it away. He said that I should give my service completely voluntarily and I agreed," she says.

Then she jokingly adds, "Of course, it also meant it would go into my income tax. When my chil-

dren heard about it, they said, 'Mummy, RM3,000! Give it to me lah!'"

Come retirement, Dr Siti Hasmah looks forward to slowing down after a most hectic and punishing 10 months.

"I don't think I'll vegetate but slow down, yes. We both have to keep ourselves fit to enjoy the retirement. But we'll continue to travel abroad, especially if there are invitations and speaking engagements."

Would Dr Mahathir consider charging a fee like former US President Bill Clinton?

"How much does Clinton charge? A million? *Alamak!*"

And it won't be just Dr Mahathir writing his memoirs. His wife plans to start writing too "little by little".

She looks forward to beginning a new life, as she puts it, and spending more time with her seven children, their spouses and 15 grandchildren.

But even as private citizens, she promises that "we will be around. We will be at KLCC shopping, eating at Piccolo Mondo and such places which we like to haunt," she says cheekily.

Well, folks, now you know where to catch them and say hello to a very familiar couple!