

The business of the Mahathir children in business has been a contentious issue among critics who believe their father's name gave them unfair advantage. They tell their side of the story to **JUNE H.L. WONG**

The difficult business of being Dr M's kids

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SELLING *goreng pisang* by the roadside. That is perhaps the only business the Mahathir sons should do that would shut up the critics.

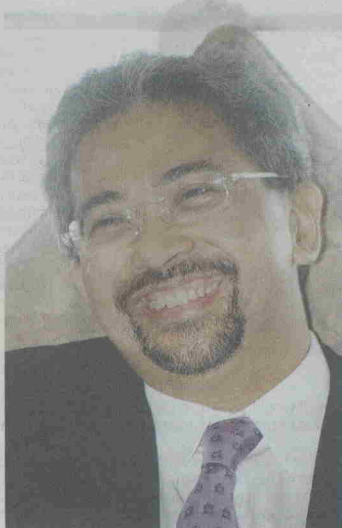
That is the sarcastic point Datin Paduka Marina makes on behalf of her brothers. To her, it is just patently unfair that people are so resentful of them as businessmen.

"They think that selling *goreng pisang* is the only business they should do. That's an insult to their intelligence and education. Mirzan went to Wharton (in the US) which is just about the best business school in the world. You don't go to Wharton and then sell *goreng pisang*. Kinda reflects badly on Wharton, don't you think?"

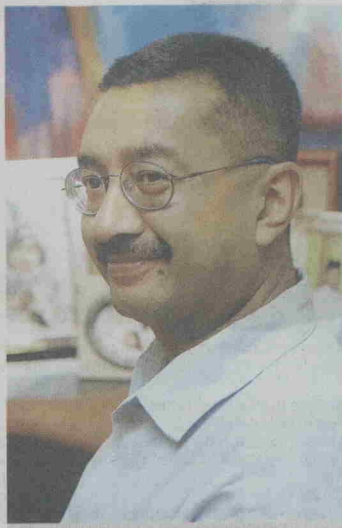
According to them, being who they are meant they have had to work harder than anyone else to prove themselves.

Says Datuk Mokhzani: "People just see silver spoons in our mouths but we have had to prove ourselves more than anyone else so that they can say, 'Oh, okay, so you actually have something between your ears.'

"I have had ideas on how to do things, good proposals to put forward, but people just think that they were other people's ideas which I had hijacked. Or they think I would use whatever political means to get things done even though I, together with the people



Eldest Mirzan: 'Do people expect him to just sell *goreng pisang*?' asks his sister Marina.



Mokhzani: 'People think we get things so easily but I have had to justify what I do doubly hard.'



Mukhriz: 'My name can help me get that first introduction but after that, I have to perform.'

I'm working with, have the technical competence, experience and expertise (to do the job)."

Another thing that hits a raw nerve with Marina is being compared with the children of former Indonesian President Suharto:

"I have a problem with people

making such comparisons. The crucial thing is we are our parents' children and we were brought up in a certain way and with certain values. It makes me so mad."

Posed the same question, Datuk Mukhriz's reply echoes his sister's: "We were not brought up that way

(to exploit the country) and my Dad would be the last person to allow such a thing."

Mokhzani has had a more personal brush with the Suharto clan and he found it telling. He met a Suharto son some years ago in London "and from the way he

talked, I knew he thought we could do the kind of things they did. I just shook my head and we never spoke again."

Because they are also careful about how they conduct them-

Used as postmen to PM

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Mazhar (left) and Maizura are really looking forward to spending more time with their father after his retirement.

self, Marina is indignant for her brother in the way he had to leave corporate life.

"I don't know the details as to why Mokhzani sold out his business interests but I can understand why he did it. I opted out of business (she was in publishing) so that I wouldn't have to deal with all this nonsense.

"People used to come up to me with all sorts of business propositions. All they wanted was my name on it. I used to wonder why they would think I would be interested in boring stuff like gas pipelines? If they wanted to interest me, then talk to me about, say, fashion. But of course people don't come to me for small things as it's not worth their while. Unfortunately, huge million dollar projects usually mean boring stuff. I just glaze over and ignore them."

Even people associated with them get "infected", Marina cites this example:

Her husband, professional photographer Tara Sosrowardoyo, once hired an assistant to help him carry the lights and bags for an assignment. After it was over, they kept in touch.

"One day, he comes up and says, 'Boss, I have joined business with this fellow in a huge project. All you have to do is to give the proposal to PM.' That was such a disappointment to us. You know that he's being taken for a ride; you know that he must have mentioned that he knows the PM's son-in-law and the fool that he was..."

But isn't there a widely-held perception that this is how big business is done in this country, that you must know the right people?

"Not with this family; it doesn't work that way," she replies.

This "use them as postmen to the PM" affects even the two youngest siblings, teenagers Mazhar and Maizura.

Recounts Mazhar: "A friend's father asked me to pass a letter to my dad and when I did,

he gave me that look and I knew, never again. He doesn't like it at all."

"Me too. The first and last time I passed him a letter, I got that look too," chips in Maizura.

That look?

"It's a look of great disappointment. He looks really sad because he knows people are trying to use his children," explains Mazhar.

After that, when faced with such requests, they referred them to the Prime Minister's

secretaries. "I would give them the number and ask them to make an appointment," says Maizura.

Despite the hassles and "burden", surely the family name has been helpful?

Yes, Marina and her siblings acknowledge. The name has helped open doors but what happens after that?

"Sure, I can pick up the phone and call someone but I prefer to write in officially, do it the proper way," says Mukhriz. "My name can help get me that first introduction but after that, I have to perform."

And if he or any Mahathir child does not perform, there would be ramifications.

"If we mess up or don't do good, it could also affect our father. That's been a way of life for us, at least for me. People think that we get things so easily, that no one can say no to us. In fact, I have had to justify what I do doubly hard. I have to make sure that what I do is the right thing so that people won't misconstrue (my actions). But there will also be people with their own agenda and will read whatever they like."

Mokhzani's experience in the corporate world left him deeply disillusioned.

As he explains it, he, like other businessmen, was hit by the 1997-98 financial crisis.

"It wasn't like because we were PM's children, we were spared or sheltered. Our shares got hit, the currency (fluctuations) affected all of us as we had borrowings from banks.

"If people thought we would get off lightly, the reverse happened. The banks wouldn't compromise. Others might have run away or gotten discounts, but because of our name, they knew that they could pressure us into paying, and to protect our family, we would do whatever was required. And we did.

"In order for me to pay, I had to sell my businesses (his stakes in Pantai Holdings Sdn Bhd and Tongkah Holdings Sdn Bhd).

"Someone told me a long time ago not to get too emotionally attached to my companies because at the right time and right price, you sell them. But it was not the right time or price or circumstances of my making, but (selling) was my way out."

Mokhzani is now what he describes as "doing one or two things on a much smaller

scale."

"It's 100th of what I had," he says of his company, Kencana Capital Sdn Bhd.

He misses his old corporate reach in the way it has ended his ability to help others.

"Whether it was Tongkah or Pantai, the group could help so many people with employment opportunities, share our experience, co-develop things.

"Now I don't have the resources to do that anymore. I used to employ 5,500 people, now I have eight. When people come to me about a job for their son or daughter, I have to ask others to help them. It's not something I can say yes to anymore. I have a place in Penang or KL or whatever. To me, that's a big loss."

Kencana Capital, he says, is a small investment company with a small stake in Porsche ("my personal thing") and a fabrication yard in Lumut.

"That's about it. We also do advisory work for people looking for businesses to buy in Malaysia."

Would he enter the big corporate scene again?

"It's very difficult to run a public listed company today because of all the things the government has put in place for corporate governance. They are all good things but I don't think the opportunities of the 1990s are presenting themselves again just yet. I'm sure they will come back as more sectors open up but I don't feel it's the right time for me to come in."

But there is one project he's pleased he had a hand in - Formula One racing.

"I wasn't instrumental - somebody else had been talking to him - but I was fortunate to be there to *cucuk-cucuk* my father in the right direction. If I'm not mistaken it was (racing legend) Sir Jackie Stewart who talked to him about it. I knew people in the F1 community because of my interest. So when my father was talking to F1 boss Bernie Ecclestone about the track, I took him to see the McLaren team. The professionalism, the technology behind F1, it all convinced him that the whole thing was a good idea."

Che Wan Mohd Adil, who is married to Dr Mahathir's second daughter Melinda, willingly acknowledges that he owes his life to his father-in-law - up to a point.

"When he sent me to Japan to learn from him, he sculpted me and equipped me for life. But after that, I was on my own.

"I can tell you that I never got any help from him (in business). I have known him for a long time and I know that if I had gone to him, he would have said, 'Nanti apa orang cakap? (What will people say?)'"

Che Wan clearly relishes the fact that he is a successful self-made businessman and has general anonymity. He declines to go into detail about his business except to say that he struck out on his own, building on the years of experience he had garnered working for Kawasaku Corporation, the trading house of Kawasaki Steel and Kawasaki Heavy Industries. He now owns an electronics company overseas.

Because he has always been independent, life won't very different for him after Dr Mahathir retires. After all, he, Melinda and their two teenage daughters have long been the "quiet" unknown members of the First Family.

As for the other siblings, it might just get easier, at long last.