

Dr M - Taking the world by storm even after retirement

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The last time The Star interviewed Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it was in the waning days of his prime ministership. It has been one year since. How has he adjusted to life in retirement? The same team of four editors - Wong Chun Wai, June H.L. Wong, K. Parkaran and Mergawati Zulfakar, who met him last year in Langkawi - set out to find out.

There were similarities as well as marked differences between the two meetings.

As before, it took months for The Star to get a date for the interview. But this time, it was not a matter of squeezing in an appointment among his pressing engagements as Prime Minister, it was because he was travelling so much as a much sought-after speaker.

As he explained it, people elsewhere wanted to hear about Malaysia and its successes and he was pleased to tell them.

In Langkawi, the team had met Dr Mahathir in a hotel where he was staying during Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace 2003 (LIMA) and we were given all of 20 minutes.

Last week's interview took place in a starkly different venue - his office on the 86th floor of the Petronas Twin Towers. He is now Petronas advisor.

Security was tight and we had to take four elevators before we were ushered into a futuristic looking reception area that had orange leather sofas under a glass dome. As we moved the sofas together and set up our cameras and tape recorders, our chatter echoed rather loudly, thanks to the dome acoustics.

Unknown to us, Tun's office lay just behind opaque glass doors on one side of the room. Indeed, it was almost like a scene from a sci-fi movie, when the glass doors suddenly and soundlessly parted to reveal him sitting behind the desk, framed by huge windows overlooking the Kuala Lumpur skyline.

Then he rose and walked towards us, looking as trim and alert as before. In Langkawi, he had worn a smart grey pinstriped Nehru-collared suit. This time, it was another similarly styled suit but charcoal-coloured.

Looking relaxed and genial, he took his seat. But habits die hard as there was no denying his larger-than-life presence; it was as if we were facing the prime minister again. We sat straight, had to remember to address him as "Tun" and mind our Ps and Qs more than usual.

If we had been wary of bringing up certain sensitive topics like Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim or whether he had any influence on the new administration, it soon became clear that he was in the mood to talk on anything we brought up.

On his family and personal life, he was jovial and light-hearted, flashing his familiar smile or laughing heartily at our attempts at levity or his own jokes.

That lightness he carried was reflected in his dressing. We could not help noticing that he had a deep red sweater under that suit; the colour showed under his long sleeves whenever he gesticulated. As far as we could remember, he never wore such a bright colour with his suits when he was in office.

When it came to issues that greatly bothered him like money politics and the Malay mindset, his face clouded and he showed his deep frustration and disappointment. When the interview ended an hour and 10 minutes later, we came away with the feeling that while Dr Mahathir may no longer be Prime Minister - a point he takes pains to emphasise - he is still deeply interested in and knowledgeable about what goes on. He may be, as he put it, watching from afar, but it is clear he remains on the lookout for his country.

LIFE AFTER RETIREMENT AS PRIME MINISTER

TUN, it is coming to almost one year, how have you been coping with life after retirement?

I have been very busy. There have been a lot of invitations for me to speak on various topics and of course the favourite topic is Malaysia and how it has managed to grow and remain peaceful. I have been travelling to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, the Gulf states, Pakistan and Egypt. So I have been very busy. In fact I have been busier because these appointments come practically every week.

It has been said former US President Bill Clinton gets up to RM1mil for a speaking engagement. Do you get any fee for yours?

No, all of them seem to be poor (laughs). The Japanese will give some payment if I give a talk there - I suppose the Japanese can afford it - but practically none of the others pays me anything at all. It is very costly for me because I have to fly there and come back. Sometimes they pay for the hotel and travelling but mostly I get nothing.

How do you select your speaking engagements since you have so many?

So many people want to know about Malaysia that I thought it would be a good thing for us to tell them about Malaysia and how it has accomplished so many things. It is very difficult for me to choose (which invitation) because most of the subjects greatly interest me. Things like race relations in Malaysia, how do you turn from an agriculture economy to an industrialised economy, things like that.

I am also very concerned about poverty, what poverty is, I have some ideas on how that can be overcome. I think the trading between nations is not fair, globalisation, the concept and the

agenda of the WTO are not fair (because) they discriminate against poor countries. These are things I am interested in and if I am invited to talk, I will go.

You have also been invited to speak at the Doha International Conference for the Family in Qatar next month. Isn't that something which is more associated with your wife than you?

I am interested in this. For one thing, there seems to be a trend towards redefining what constitutes a family. Today homosexuals living together are considered to be a family and people who have children out of wedlock are also considered as families. So there seems to be a change in people's attitude towards the family and what constitutes a family. I have some very strong views about this. That is why I accepted this invitation.

On your recent trip to Manila, you were treated almost as if you were still the leader of the country, how do you react to this? Did you expect to be treated that way?

I don't expect to be treated as a leader. But of course some people (do) because they knew me from before. Of course I know President (Gloria Macapagal) Arroyo quite well and she invited me for a private dinner. If am invited I will accept, but if I am treated like an ordinary citizen, I have no problem.

Many Malaysians still refer to you as the Prime Minister. When you wake up in the morning, do you still get up and occasionally think you are the PM? No I don't think of myself as the Prime Minister anymore but I do know that I have to get up the morning because I have work to do (laughs). I go to office as usual; sometimes in the afternoon I don't work. But even if I'm not in the office, I'm working at home.

In fact, I spend a lot more time now working in the office and at home because I need to write my

speeches. I am not like other people who can speak off the cuff or who can type on the word processor, I have to write in long hand. I am very particular - some speeches I revise five or six times - so it takes a lot of time for me to complete a speech.

What is the progress of your memoir?

Not making much progress (laughs). I am so busy correcting and re-correcting the drafts of my speeches that I don't have much time to write about myself. I have written a little, but I am revising what I have. I must admit I am not very good at talking about myself. And writing a memoir is talking about myself; about what happened and how things were handled, basically (my) government work.

FAMILY RELATIONS

Do you have time with your grandchildren now?

I do have a little bit more time with my grandchildren. Sometimes they will invite me for dinner, things like that. But I don't think it is enough.

You have a reputation for being a stern father, so what sort of a grandfather are you?

You know grandfathers, they are not like fathers at all, they are very tolerant. Of course I need the affection of my grandchildren, I can't be strict with them.

Speaking of children and grandchildren, when your son decided to contest in the Umno elections, what advice did you give him to survive in the very competitive politics in Umno?

I told him when he lost (in his first try for the Kubang Pasu division youth chief post in July), that is politics. That was about all I told him, very little else. I told him that he should not be in any way arrogant and think that he had achieved great things. This is the same advice my mother gave me when I was young; that I should-

n't think that I had done anything great at all. She would deflate me. So what I told Mukhriz (when he won the highest number of votes in the Umno Youth exco elections) was, "Well, you are lucky."

Did you discourage your children from taking part in politics when you were Umno president and Prime Minister?

Yes, I did not allow them to take part in politics because I did not like people thinking that they were riding on my position. But now that I have retired, I think I have no right anymore to ask them to sacrifice whatever it is that they want to do so as to show that I am a good man who does not want to have a dynasty and all that. They can do what they like now.

LOVE OF THE COMMON PEOPLE

During the Umno general assembly, you received a standing ovation that lasted a minute or so. What was in your mind at that moment?

I think it is a nice feeling to know that people still remember and appreciate you. Of course when other people asked me about this, not the Press, I told them, "Actually I paid all of them to stand up" (laughs). But I am glad as I think it is genuine. I feel very satisfied; at least people remember me.

That affection is also evident from the ordinary people. We understand that when you go out, they have no qualms about coming up to you, speaking to you?

I like to do my own shopping. In fact when I first became deputy prime minister, I was told that I was not allowed to go out and do shopping. Whatever I wanted to buy would be brought to the house. That would have changed my way of life and I was not prepared for that. So even when I was Prime Minister, I used to go out and do my own shopping. I enjoy shopping and people do

come up to express their support and say thank you.

Once I heard a man shouting - I think he was from Keadilan - shouting in anger, I suppose. I just looked at him. After that I think he did not have anything more to say... (Laughter)

But generally people have been very kind and supportive; young people, especially, have expressed their appreciation. I worked for 22 years (as PM) - a long time. And when you retire (at an age when) you are closer to the grave (laughter) instead of earlier, that makes everything worthwhile.

We understand you get a lot of little notes from people.

Some people just want to say something. I suppose they did not get the chance before and so they write a note to say thank you. It's very touching. I still receive letters - usually handwritten ones - expressing appreciation of the 22 years of my prime ministership.

WHY HE KEEPS HIS OWN COUNSEL

Do any of the younger leaders come and see you to seek your views on anything?

One or two have come. But they are nobody, really, in Umno. Some are worried about certain things, some are not happy with money politics, so they come and see me. But not many.

What about Cabinet ministers?

Practically none. Maybe one or two might just drop by. But I have said that I will not interfere in Umno politics so I normally don't pass any opinion.

There has been talk that Pak Lah has sought your advice on certain matters....

No, never, never. I have not been asked for any advice nor have I given any, except for only one case. That was when I thought that he was going to drop someone and I thought that this

someone should not be dropped. sent a letter (to say) "Please don't drop this person because he is not what other people say he is and that I am sure he would perform. And indeed he has done very well. And this person was retained? Yes.

Still, there is a strong perception even among ordinary people that you continue to wield great influence.

No, that is not true at all. I have no influence and I don't intend to influence.

But you watch from afar?
Yes, I have a right like any other citizen to watch from afar.

But if you felt strongly enough about something like the case you just mentioned, would you make known your views to Pak Lah?

I have not done anything like that save for that one occasion. As much as I did not want others to influence me when I was prime minister, I do not like to do it to others who may resent my giving unsolicited advice. But in this particular case, I thought it would be a wrong decision to leave him out. The person whom I helped does not know I did it. He did not ask me and he doesn't know.

MALAY PRIVILEGES AND GLOBALISATION

Some non-Malays have tried to digest and figure out why Umno brought up the subject of the Malay agenda again and not talk about Bangsa Malaysia. They feel that this is going backward. Why the need to re-emphasise the Malay identity?

I suppose there is a feeling of fear. Recently, there was a seminar by young Malays on "Malays in danger." They disagree with certain things that are being done. They think this will hurt the Malays and not help achieve the percentages that have been deter-



FRANK TALK: Dr Mahathir gesturing while emphasising a point during the interview at his office in the Petronas Twin Towers recently.

mined by the New Economic Policy and the like.

They see the Chinese withdrawing. Before, they saw the Chinese going to the same schools, now they won't go to the same schools and there is other evidence that the other communities are also becoming racist. That is their perception, so they respond in the same way.

You have spoken with great passion on the problem of our graduates not being able to find suitable jobs because they took the wrong courses and they are not prepared to be market-oriented. Can you elaborate on this?

Why is this only happening to Malay graduates and not Chinese graduates? The reason is probably the Chinese graduates choose the right subjects so they are employable. We find that the Malay graduates, especially those from the Malay stream, can't speak English at all.

No matter how much value you put on a certificate, the fact remains that an employer wants somebody with whom he can communicate. The employer is not Malay, he is a foreigner. And if he's not going to be able to communicate with you, he will not take you.

There is also attitude. There are some who start off by demanding good pay. Obviously, if you ask how much even before he has decided to take you, he won't think you have the right attitude for the job. So there are many reasons why the Malay graduates are not being employed.

I remember we got companies to hire unemployed Malay graduates and pay them RM400 each. But when they got the job, they refused to do anything because it was not their line and they didn't want to learn. They were just marking time, waiting for the kind of job they were interested in. Obviously, these people do not

have the right attitude towards work.

You (the media) should do a survey. Ask them why they are unemployed; have they ever received any offer; did they make an application, did they apply only for jobs they were qualified for or for other jobs; are they prepared to accept lower pay Some kind of survey should be carried out, then we will know the real reasons.

If the institutions of higher learning are not producing the right graduates for the market, does this reflect on our planning in the first place?

Yes, we have tried to plan, we have tried to produce more engineers, scientists, IT (graduates) and in those areas, sometimes there is an oversupply. But by and large, most of the graduates who studied professional courses - medicine, law, architecture - are employed.

The ones who are not employed are those who take up arts and religious studies. We have 20,000 to 30,000 religious studies graduates and there are no jobs for them. But if you tell a person, look, you should not study religion because there is no future for you, no employment, he is going to be angry with you. He is going to tell PAS that this government is anti-Islam: "I want to study religion but they are preventing me from doing so."

But if they are out of a job, they would then say, "Look, this country is very bad. I am educated, I have religious knowledge but they don't provide jobs for me." But the fact is there are no jobs. So when you plan, you have this constraint. If you don't want to study Malay, for example, you are anti-Malay language; why are you learning English? Or it could be "I am a Malay, why should I learn English?" That kind of attitude has created this kind of mismatch.

Many people feel that you are frank and you speak your mind because you were PM for 22 years. But it looks like fewer and fewer Umno leaders are prepared to stick out their necks because they are quite new in the party, they just got elected and got new government posts, and they also want to be popular. But the clock is ticking away and the competitors are not the Indians or Chinese but foreigners. Globalisation is also at our doorstep. The subsidies and crutches will be meaningless. How do you see this?

We have tried to tell them if you depend on subsidies, you are going to be very weak. But they don't seem to understand. We tell them if you use crutches, you will not be able to stand up. Throw away the crutches, stand up straight because you still have the capacity.

I have talked about this thing and as a doctor I know very well the meaning of crutches but somehow or rather they want the easy way out. If I get an AP and I sell it and make some money, it's all right, they say.

The great debacle was the computer labs. We tried to help as many people as possible because we were accused of giving things to only a selected few. But every one of them sold their contracts. Sold and sold and sold until finally the last man could not sell and had to do the work. He then found he would make terrible losses and so he tried to cut corners, used bad materials and the labs collapsed.

They know it, they see it right before their eyes but they learn nothing. Next time they will do it again.

■ Tomorrow: Dr Mahathir on Datukships, the US Presidential elections and other issues



Video link: <http://thestar.com.my/mmedia/video>

Putting money politics in the right perspective

FOR 22 years as president, you have pleaded, you have cried to stop money politics in Umno but it seems it has worsened. It is so blatant that people talk about it. Do you feel frustrated when you read about this, to see this thing happening?

I feel very frustrated because this is something that is quite personal. It is you yourself who must fight against this desire to do something that you know is wrong. It is like rejecting drugs, for example.

(People) reject drugs because drugs are bad, not because there is a policeman standing by or somebody is going to report them. Because drugs are bad, they reject drugs. Of course some fail and they take drugs.

Corruption is just like that. It is just as bad as drugs because it is going to undermine your moral character. It is going to result in leaders who are corrupt becoming elected. I mean, do you want leaders who are elected to be corrupt people?

If you accept money from (someone to vote for him), then you are accepting and supporting a corrupt leader. Unfortunately, everybody talks about money politics, everybody says it is rampant, that even Puteri is involved. But no one wants to say who. And they know who.

If we are against something we must be prepared to come out and say this is the person who did it, even if you become unpopular. But they are afraid that at the next elections, these people would not vote for them because they revealed them. Then of course you are really not sincere in fighting against corruption.

Some leaders have said there is a need to redefine what is corruption. Do you see this as compromising on the way they face corruption?

I think there are certain things which do not amount to corruption. You are sitting at

a table and someone sits down and you give a cup of coffee, that does not amount to corruption.

But if you give regular fees to your supporters or to people who are going to support you, if you travel all over the country and you give *makan* to everybody, that is corruption. Perhaps it is necessary to define what is corruption.

But usually corruption in Umno, I know, is giving money. There were people who came to me before I was elected vice-president (1975) and told me if I gave them money, they were prepared to give me a bloc vote.

I said it was all right. If I don't win, I don't win. That is why I very nearly lost as vice-president. I was number three, very far down.

Are you saying money politics started way back in the late 1970s and 80s?

Yes, there were people already talking about it. But when there was a contest between me and Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah), money politics became very big. It has worsened since then.

In his presidential speech, Pak Lah spoke on so many issues. But after the Umno meeting, what did people talk about? Money politics only.

They didn't talk about Islam Hadhari, bumiputra policy or anything, they talked only about that because that is the main thing that bothers them and yet they are not prepared to fight against it.

For 22 years when you were in office, you tried very hard to fight corruption. Do you think that Pak Lah can do anything?

(Only if) people are prepared to name names. The moment you are offered money, you should inform (the authorities) that so-and-so is in my office offering money or

Dr M: Umno's credibility now at stake

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demanding money from me. That would stop it completely. If somebody does not report then you can consider that person corrupt.

But a lot of things are not done directly, it is done through networking.

Even through networking, eventually it has to come to you. Which net is used, you have to identify (it).

There is a perception or sentiment among Umno leaders that they should not be talking about money politics anymore as it hurts the party's image more. Do you agree with that kind of statements?

Definitely it will hurt the party's image. I hear that Malay professionals are not joining Umno because they think it is a corrupt party. But if you don't

talk and the thing goes on, it is bad also. If you talk, you must be prepared to do something about it, not just say, "Oh there is money politics." Then when people ask, "How do you know?" you say you know (but as to) "Who?" (you reply) "Oh, I cannot reveal." I think it is very bad for Umno because it implicates even the people who are not involved.

So it is working against the party when you say that with that kind of image and reputation, Umno is not drawing young people to join? That will be very important.

Yes, that is very important. The credibility of the party is now at stake. We are the Government and we are trying to ensure that we have a government that is not corrupt.

If this happens, people will say, "Huh, you want us to be incorrupt but you are worse than us." That will undermine

the credibility of the Government. So, you must clear up this problem.

Where is the money coming from?

I don't know. Apparently lots of people who made a lot of money. Maybe there are supporters who think that if so-and-so gets into office, they might get better treatment and all that. Cronies-lah.

In the elections, there were a few surprises like the return of Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik. What is your reaction to this?

I really don't know. I think he has been trying many, many times. He could not even get into his own division. There were also some people who actually blocked him. He may have had some sympathy votes but I am not very sure.

Maybe people will accuse him of using money or whatever.



SPEAKING UP: Dr Mahathir relating his own experience of having to act against a friend who had done wrong.

er. But those people who want to accuse, should speak up if they have evidence.

That's the problem with money politics. People talk about it but people do not want to do anything about it. In fact, two of the most senior people who lost (in the Umno elections), have said they know who but they cannot reveal because it would hurt their friends.

Now if you are thinking about your friends, then of

course let's not talk about money politics. But if you are thinking about the nation, the people, the morality of the people, the success or failure of the people, whether we elect corrupt leaders or not, then we must start, we must say "He is the one who gave."

Which one do you value more - friendship or honesty and incorruptibility? If you think that corruption is very bad, your friend will have to go.

I had to decide against my friend once, you know.

The man I brought up, who was going to be my successor. But if I find that somebody has done wrong, sorry, my friend has to go. I don't care what's going to happen to me. And I became very unpopular.

But that's all right, because if you are in a position to make decisions, you must make them based on your conscience and principles.