



TORCH BEARER

MUKHRIZ MAHATHIR ON FAMILY,
BUSINESS, KHAIRY JAMALUDDIN &
HIS RESPONSIBILITY TO STOP ANWAR
IBRAHIM FROM RETURNING TO UMNO

INTERVIEW BY JASON TAN
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YOU MIGHT CALL him the stealth sibling. Of the Mahathir children, Dato' Mukhriz Mahathir appears to be the one who has led the most 'normal' life and on whom the media is yet to train its sights.

At 41, he is married with three kids. The companies he is involved in or leads (Opcom Holdings Berhad (fibre optics), Airzed Networks Sdn Bhd (wireless tech), Bioven Holdings Sdn Bhd (bio tech), among others) hum along largely under the radar.

In keeping with his current station in life, he chairs several industry bodies such as the Malaysian Franchise Association and the MIGHT Photonics Interest Group (Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology). He is also coordinator of Peace Malaysia, which is actively involved in fund raising and relief efforts in Pakistan.

Apart from the fact of his surname (which he correctly points out) this is the CV of someone who enjoys engaging with the world and who does well for himself – and who is a 'normal human being'.

But being Mahathir must increase the job hazards. To drop decorum for a moment – if Malaysia Boleh, then the expectation is that Mukhriz Mahathir lagi boleh. And it is he who appears to have been entrusted with carrying the torch of his father's legacy after the latter's retirement in 2003. Among siblings Mokhzani, Mirzan and Marina, it is Mukhriz who is the representative in politics as a member of Umno Youth exco, a post he won handily at the party's general assembly last year.

And here is where the hurly burly seems to be building a head of steam – this town is too small for the son of the former Prime Minister and the son-in-law of the current Prime Minister. Even by Bollywood standards, this plot is a bit, how do we say, 'drama'.

Khairy Jamaluddin, said son-in-law, deputy head of Umno Youth (and, excitable punters say, putative leader of the country), recalls his first impression of 'Khriz, whom he met when the latter attended Sophia University in Tokyo more than a decade ago. 'He struck me as a very nice, down to earth person. Khriz is quite a bit older than I am, but I have a very good relationship with him.

'We both have very busy schedules. There's been a lot of talk and speculation about our relationship, much to our amusement, and when we meet up privately we have a good laugh about it.

'His ability to keep his feet on the ground is a great virtue of his, and the very unassuming way he approaches people speaks volumes for his great character.'

Mukhriz's formative years were at Maktab Rendah Sains Pengkalan Chepa in Kelantan, to which he attributes his amiability towards people from different walks of life. He is now president of Ansara, or Anak Sains Mara, the Mara alumni association.

His relationship with his father was 'arm's length ... discipline issues, my mum had to deal with us unless he was upset about something, then he would speak to us himself. He was very conservative.

'But at the same time, he was very – I don't know if there's such a thing as being conservative but liberal at the same time... So, as a dad, he of course wanted the best for us but allowed us to make our own mistakes...

'I believe that my sister [Marina] being so liberal came from him.

We had Rabbis walking around town (laughs) during the conference. So even for us, it was a new experience.

How did people take to that? What was their response to the conference?
We had to do a lot of explaining... We were fortunate that the government supported the conference in the first place which helped a lot in getting participants in. As it turned out, the Israelis had an easier time getting in than the Palestinians... Absolutely no problem. Malaysia Airlines helped...

The comments coming from the Israelis I thought were very interesting. And these were writers, so, their articles appeared in the *Jerusalem Post*, *Haaretz*... and they were saying that never before had they been in a Muslim country and received so hospitably, that they had

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Open-mindedness, and the streak in challenging convention all the time...

'But I think what came through to all of us was the need to help people. I'm involved in Peace Malaysia, Mokhzani has his own way of helping people, Marina has the AIDS Foundation, Mirzan has his own magazine and Islamic website; everyone has their own way of contributing. That must have trickled down from both my parents.'

We would talk more about the family business, rabbis in Kuala Lumpur, Peace Malaysia and more...

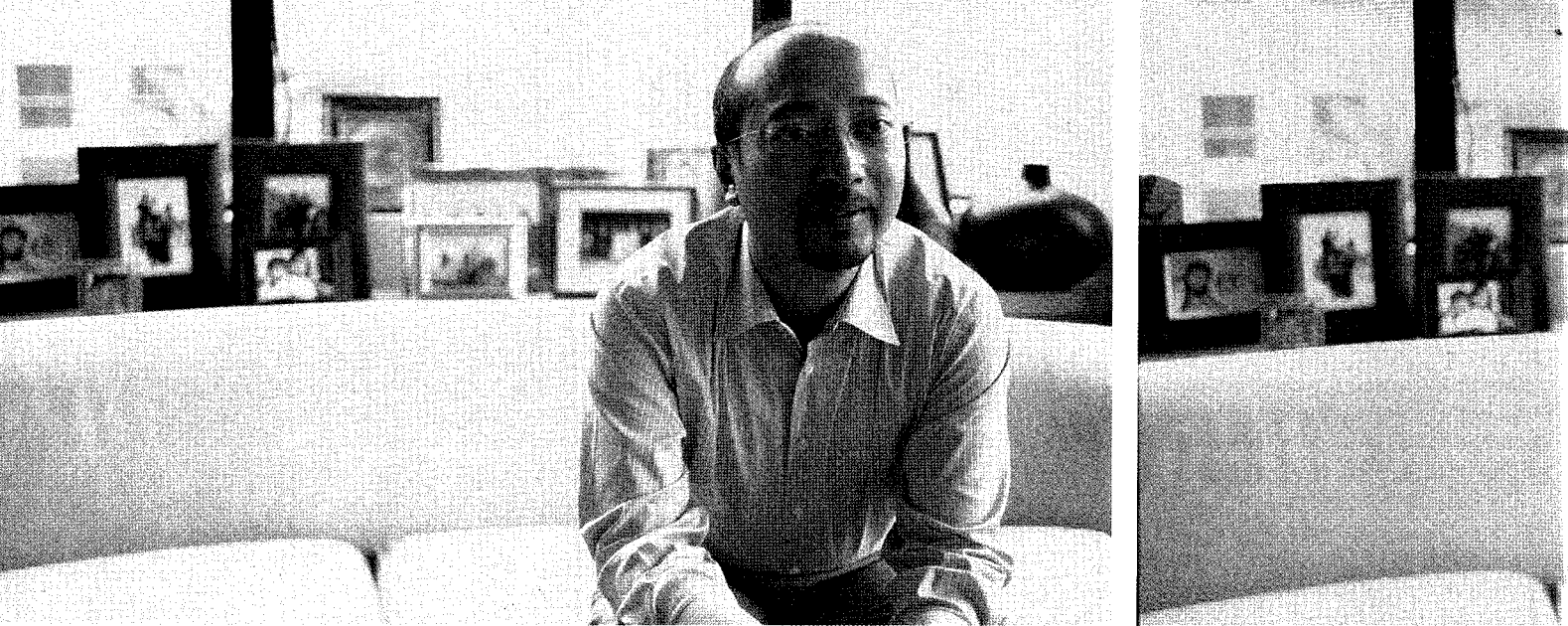
What do you think is expected of Peace Malaysia?

Well, based on what we have been doing so far, we have a two-pronged objective: humanitarian work, and intellectual discourse. We organise conferences, the last one being in March, where we did a Peace in Palestine conference attended by over 52 different countries; very good frank discussions. We had Palestinians here, we also had Israelis here. [The conference] was acknowledged even by the Americans. Of course, the ones who came were also anti-Zionists but at least you heard the Israeli point of view. It is an experience for people here to understand that Zionism doesn't mean Judaism, and doesn't mean Israeli.

never felt so safe. These were Israelis saying this. Of course the Palestinians said the same. But the Israelis were saying they could walk in a Muslim country and feel so free. And they were allowed to do as they liked, and go wherever they wanted. As I understand it, after the conference they were in Penang and they met with the DAP and we were fine with that...

Since I am also active politically, I had to explain to the kampong folk what the conference was all about. They were very interested in the Palestinian issue, but at the same time they were asking what's this about the Israelis coming in... And they, I think they began to realise these things that were not even obvious to us – that there is a major difference between being an Israeli, being a Jew and being a Zionist. I explained to them that there are anti-Zionist Jews; in fact, there are anti-Zionist Israelis; that in fact, only a minority of Jews are in Israel, and that there are non-Jewish Zionists. So these things are all new to us. We thought all three of them are the same but they are not, they are different.

How did they take the explanation?
They took it very well, which was the interesting part. When I was first appointed Chief of [Umno Youth's]



International Bureau and NGO Relations, I told Datuk Seri Hisham [Umno Youth head, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein] that I was afraid that then I wouldn't have a reason to move around the country and meet with people. As you know, Umno politics is about the grassroots; if you don't have the opportunity to meet people in the grassroots, then you run the risk of not getting close to the people who count the most in Umno politics. I later realised that because I was involved in Palestine, in Aceh, and now, Pakistan, that these were the first things that people asked me about when I moved around the kampongs. 'What was Aceh like, what did you do there, what was your experience like? Is it true that this and that... Palestine, what's really the issue there?'

Of course, they read about it in the papers and they see it in the news. But they also want a first-hand account of what I saw, who I met, what I talked to them about, and how I felt about it personally having been there. It gave them a more personal feel [of the issues]. So I told Datuk Hisham, Hey it turns out people are interested in what I am doing. And he said, I told you so (laughs). Just because you're in the International Bureau, don't think that you don't have something to use to connect with the political base.

And I now find that this is very gratifying. Anyone can talk about education and social problems – everyone has a right to speak about these things – but about international issues, I think not many. It puts me in a kind of a niche so that when they see me, they say, Aman Malaysia so, so tell us about Aceh, tell us about Palestine, Pakistan; what do you think about Southern Thailand...

This might call into question the usual assumptions about what the public might or might not be curious about. And it looks like people are quite curious about the world...

You'd be surprised what the average kampong folk know. He may be a farmer, but when it comes to issues like these, he

wants to know, What's the deal really with Palestine? Why can't we do something about it? We shouldn't assume that they are not interested. They are very concerned, very interested.

This might be an interesting juncture to consider Malay identity. You mentioned in your speech at the recent Umno General Assembly that you consider yourself one of the 'Anak-anak NEP' (child of the Dasar Ekonomi Baru, or New Economic Policy). Who else would be the Anak-anak NEP, or Melayu Baru? What is the public perception of them? Among young Malays, most must have benefited from NEP somehow or another. In my case it was directly, as it was for some of my friends because we went through the

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MRSM (Maktab Rendah Sains Mara) system. As you know, Mara was established when the NEP was adopted. I am also president of Ansara (the Mara alumni association), [and] all 42 000 of us, from 35 colleges, are anak NEP, the way I see it. And I think it is our responsibility to try and contribute back to society, particularly the rural folk because many of us came from there, but now so many of us are young professionals either working for Petronas, for Tenaga [etc] and probably have dual-income households, a nice home, one or two cars, kids in good schools. Compared with their parents who were probably farmers or small-time businessmen in the rural towns, it is a marked improvement [in living standards].

I don't think [Ansara members] are the only ones. There are many others who took the same kind of path to get to where they are now. I consider all of them anak NEP. But

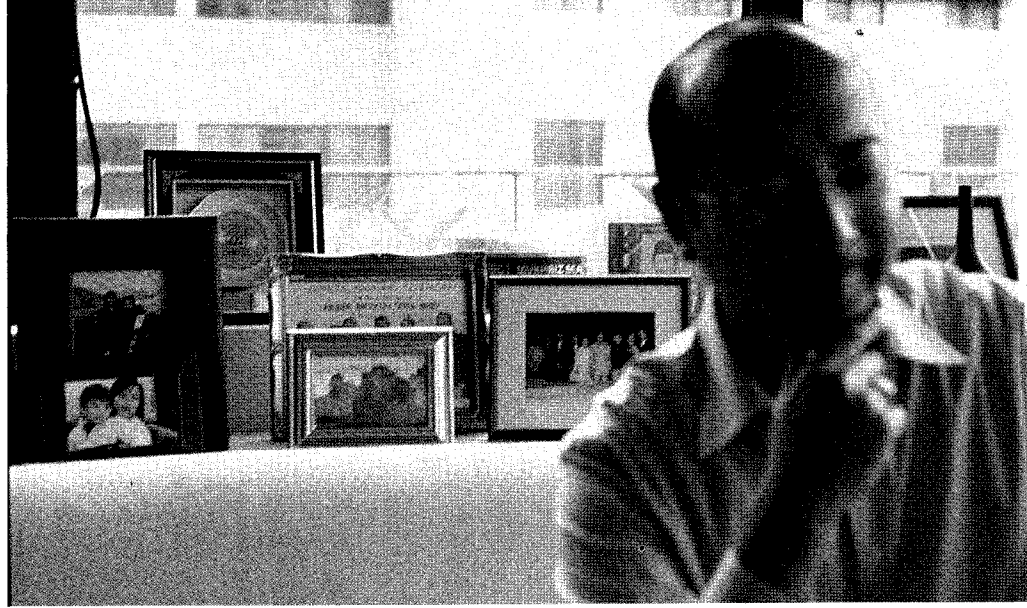
I find it a little bit disconcerting that even among Malays, there are some who feel that the NEP has become outdated. They may have reason to feel that way, but let's try to find a way to address these concerns properly before we throw out the baby with the bath water; let's try to find out what really is the problem and then try to address it.

Because I feel personally and think that the Melayu Baru, if you want to call them that, should ideally be a person who is provided some assistance, particularly those from families that are not well-to-do, and who need just the right kind of help to open up opportunities for them. But at the same time, there is a point where meritocracy kicks in. I believe there is a balance to be struck here between affirmative action type policies and meritocracy, that these two

are not mutually exclusive. We don't want people who are subsidy-mentality types, who feel that they cannot do anything without grants, or being given things on a silver platter. On the other extreme, we can't do with absolute meritocracy because the playing field is still not level. Until such time we correct this disparity, I feel that a Melayu Baru is someone who is still given help until he has reached a point where he can compete with the rest. That way, we try to adjust both sides, without going for the extremes.

A middle way?

Yes, that's why I am very concerned when we hear comments that maybe we don't need the NEP anymore, full meritocracy, let's just liberalise everything, particularly in this country, where the Malays are the majority and, unfortunately, the ones who are of lower income, come particularly



from among the Malays in the rural areas. We've been working on correcting this disparity for a good 30 years now. It could be an implementation issue; the PM was complaining about leakages and some are internal factors we need to correct ourselves. Pak Lah was talking about it, even my father was talking about it – how we abuse some of the programmes meant to help. This is sinful. But I am just afraid that the attitude and the activities of a small minority is affecting those who deserve it, and who will lose the benefit of it.

That's the public concern, that the aid does not get distributed to those who most deserve it...
Yeah, exactly...

Education policies come to mind... you were at Maktab Sains Mara in its early years. It is one of the outcomes of the NEP and meant to be more accessible in comparison with, say, Malay College Kuala Kangsar which started out admitting royalty only before it opened up. Is someone who comes from MRSM of a certain stamp and one who comes from MCKK of another?

I think we try to work with them. In fact, in all the programmes Ansara has organised, we invite others to get involved. One example is the Kongress Profesional Muda Melayu which we organised in the year 2000 and 2001 and that was basically a follow-up to the Kongress Ekonomi Bumiputera. We talked about education, the economy, entrepreneurship, science and technology, and about religion and culture; just to see what we need to do to create a Malay that is an all-rounder. I guess, basically, what Pak Lah is talking about. The 'towering Malay', that sort of thing that came later. It's interesting to note that although we organised it, only 20% of the participants were Ansara; another 80% were people who just shared the same objectives and concerns. Of course, the MCOBA (Malay College Old

Boys Association) guys were there also. In fact, we invited them to join our organising committee and they got involved.

As I understand it, the MRSM model was, in parts, taken from MCKK. I understand that Encik Wahab Ali, one of the founders of MRSM, went to New York to see how one of the colleges there taught using very creative means, very unconventional methods. He brought these back and used them at MRSM. So that's why it was different. MRSM was meant to give Malay students, particularly from the kampongs, a chance at getting really high-class education. The whole idea was to prove that given the opportunity, they could excel. And MCKK was just too exclusive; it was just one college. There are now 36 Mara colleges; we may be all different, but we all came from the same system and we identify with each other. I have friends who are graduates of MRSM Seremban, from Kuantan. I myself am from Kota Baru, and we don't have a problem mixing with each other. I would say, 90% came from poor families and now they've come good. So because of this link, they have certain sentiments towards rural Malays.

I think to some extent, MCKK was the same, but it was seen as more elite. There were more richer kids. It was a boarding school that was meant originally for the royalty and then the 'ruling class'. Someone was telling me, I'm not so sure whether it is true or not, that the difference between Ansara and MCOBA is that Ansara is an elite group, but that MCOBA is an elitist group. At first I thought (laughs), What's the difference? He said, there's a major difference – an elite group is a group that is privileged because of their education. You may be an elite but your sentiments, your thinking, your concerns are still rooted in society; you still have direct links with them. Whereas, as elitist group doesn't necessarily connect with the rest...

Did your siblings go through the same system as you did?

Mokhzani did. Mirzan was sent to London when he was in Form 3. So all of us, we were at some point or another away from the family in boarding schools.

In your formative years, what was your relationship with politics? When did you become aware of your father's work, politics... in short, when did your politicisation begin?

In high school, I was in Kelantan, and not only in Kelantan, but in Pengkalan Chepa, [PAS spiritual leader] Nik Aziz's base, [which it still is] even right now. But at that time it was still Datuk Asri's [former PAS leader Datuk Asri Muda], when PAS was in BN and then out again, so there was a lot of political turmoil. And I think everyone was aware that my dad was Deputy Prime Minister then, and when I entered Form Five, he became PM. So you couldn't help it but become politically aware under those circumstances because in Kelantan, politics is the national pastime, or I mean it's the state pastime (laughs).

So we couldn't help but get politically aware, even at that age... Even now, I have very strong links with Kelantan – I consider it my second home. I feel comfortable; I speak the dialect, and still have many, many friends there. I guess it was at that stage, at least for me, where we were becoming aware of the political scene.

And from earlier on, it was the intention of my parents that we were treated like anyone else, that we would be rewarded when we deserved it and be punished when we did wrong. I was caned for smoking, like everyone else. At that time it was probably not so funny but you know – absolutely no special treatment. And it was an excellent training ground for me, in that I could connect with people at all levels. I can go back to Kedah, to Kuantan, travel around the country. I blend in very easily. I don't feel at all uncomfortable.

I must say that now my peers, my own batch, not all of them are pro-government. They're still my friends [even if] some are

outright PAS supporters. We joke about it when we meet... Some of them can be very blatant, you won't believe what these guys are saying but we can get into friendly NEPate. At least there's a link there. Most of my friends may not be Umno members but at least they support the government. So that's some help (laughs).

When did you start thinking of a possible career in politics?

I wanted to do business administration but at that age it was not easy to make decisions on your own; I had guidance from others, particularly from my parents. I was offered by Mara to be sent to the US. At that time, we were sending hundreds of students overseas, particularly to the US and UK. Basically, Mara said that we will give you a scholarship, you can study business administration, I think it was somewhere in California.

All they needed was a green light from my dad, and when I asked him he said 'No'. And I asked him, what do you mean 'No'? He said, Absolutely no way you're going there. So I said, Where am I going? He said, You go to Japan. I obviously didn't like that. But he had just launched in 1981 the Look East policy; the first thing he did when he came into power. So in 1982 I was sent to Japan for five years. I was like a guinea pig. I think in my batch there were only two of us, me and this other girl. But we never met when we were in Japan, so the whole five years I never bumped into her.

Coming from Kelantan, I was definitely as a foreigner there (laughs)... language, food, culture, my gosh, it was quite traumatic for the first six months or so. But no regrets. That was the right decision for me. I went to the States after that only to find that the Americans were very preoccupied with learning about how the Japanese did it.

WE ARE GOOD FRIENDS, BUT IN POLITICS, SOMETIMES, UNINTENTIONALLY, PEOPLE START PERCEIVING YOU THAT YOU ARE TWO ENDS OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM.

— ON KHAIRY JAMALUDDIN

So your entry into politics, it was very gradual, a by-the-way sort of thing?

No, the interest is there, definitely. I knew what it was about. In 22 years of being the PM's son, you get to see that the kinds of things he needed to do, the sacrifices that he needed to make... But I could see how it was something very important to do, that if you felt you had something to contribute, that you should try to step up to it.

It was just that we were not allowed to do so. My dad refused – there was just no way that he would allow us to be active in politics [when he was Prime Minister]. We could be ordinary party members, but to hold a

position was a different story all together.

I think that's the reason why Mokhzani never really could get very far. Obviously, he had a lot to contribute. He had a lot of experience, and he knew where he could really make a difference. And people liked him, people wanted him in and could see what kind of value he could provide. But because my dad was there, he just you know... I mean, for Hisham too, you know,

I think Hisham appointed him Umno Youth treasurer, he told my father after the fact. So, he said [to my father], Sorry it's too late, we've appointed him already. I don't think my father was very pleased about that...

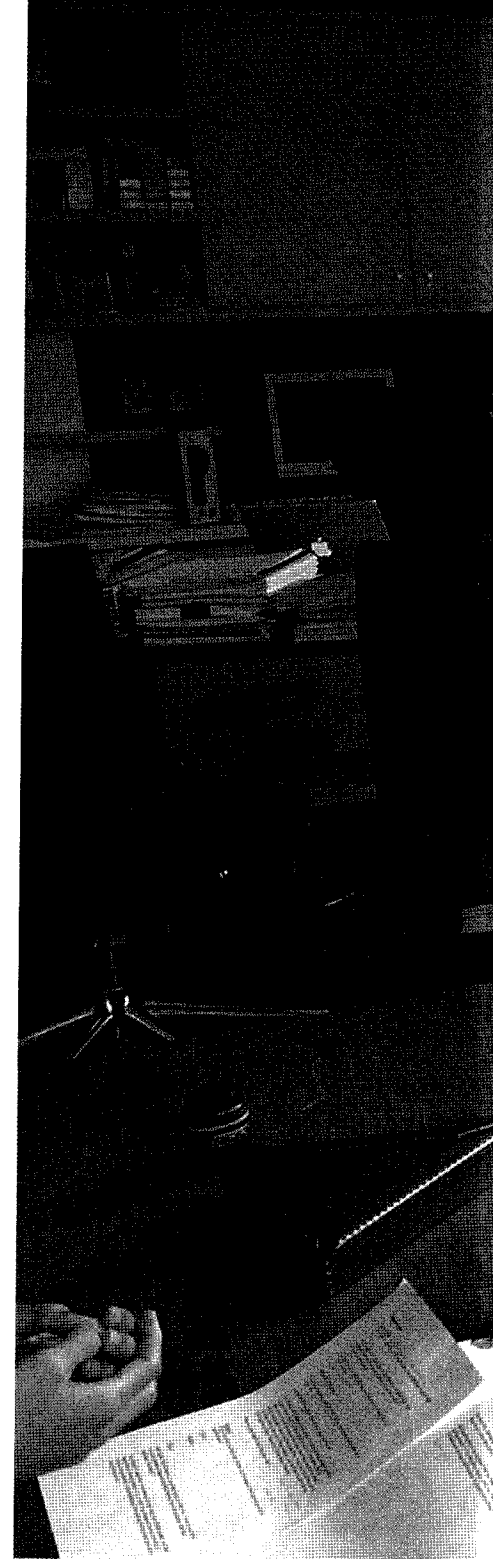
I won't say that I was glad about it or anything like that, but the fact remains that when my dad retired in 2003, I was going to be 40 the next year, and in Umno Youth, as you know, you need to be below 40 [to stand for party elections]. So I had just one year to get in... (laughter) I'm not saying that I'm glad he retired... but had he stayed on for one more year, I wouldn't have had a chance to [stand for elections]. In Umno, it's always nice to come in from a wing, either Puteri or Pemuda, and proceed from there. It's a nicer route. And you establish a base that moves with you. So, I was fortunate [that my Dad retired when he did] in that sense.

This is probably going to be a perennial question: The talk is that in ten to 15 years, the premier political rivalry will be between you and Khairy [Jamaluddin, Umno Youth deputy head]. The talk is of proxies and camps. What is the view from the inside, can you explain what the dynamics of personal and political relationships between the two of you are like?

My relationship with him is very good. I've known him for a long time. When I

was studying in Japan, his late father was the Malaysian ambassador there; [Khairy] was living in Japan at the time. Being a Malaysian, and being a foreigner, you sometimes get homesick for Malaysian food. So where do you go but to the ambassador's house. I hung out with his family a lot and know them really well.

But there was a period when we didn't communicate for a while because I was in the States and he was, I think, in the UK; [then] he was in Singapore and I was in the US but when he came back we hooked up again and we established a relationship. We are good friends, but in politics, sometimes, unintentionally,



people start perceiving you that you are two ends of the political spectrum.

He decided to go for the No 2 spot in Umno Youth; I wanted to go just for the Exco and people began enquiring about whether I'd be interested in the No 2 position. I said, No, that was never my intention. Why would I want to do that? So, from there already there was this so-called rivalry when I didn't see it at all. I guess both of us were given the spotlight because I am my dad's son, and he's the PM's son-in-law and we both approach politics in a different way.

I was just afraid that people would think that I was behind [the unfriendly reception]



he received at the Umno General Assembly, which is obviously ridiculous, and he knows that, I'm sure. But whatever it is right now, although we know each other pretty well, when it comes to politics, he's my No 2 boss, after Hisham.

I also sometimes feel that within Umno, if everything is hunky dory, it's kind of like boring, particularly when it comes to Umno election season; they want to start pitting one against the other. [Contesting the Umno Youth deputy chief post] is not necessarily what I want to do, particularly now.

It's far too soon to know what I want to decide my next course of action is. And

I think he [Khairy] is not certain about it himself also. A lot of things can happen between now and a few years' time.

Let's not forget that there are also individuals out there who are equally, if not more, capable and who may be interested in the top positions in Umno Youth, or even further. Let's not discount them.

Just because we have the son of the ex-PM or the son-in-law of the current PM doesn't mean that there are no others. And I think that is a major mistake to make. Because I move around, I meet a lot of people, and I know there are many who are very good people out there who not only have the

right experience, but the right capabilities. And just because they don't have a name, they don't get the attention that we get. I do wonder whether I'm getting all this attention because of [my work now] or still, because of my last name. I guess this is something that will always forever be there so I don't dwell on it too much...

There is a general perception that there are dynasties in Malaysian politics, with all their attendant implications for our political culture...

Well, let me dispel that. Not all of us [politicians] are sons of politicians or



daughters of politicians. The majority who are politically active are not from 'political families', so what about their role?

It's just this minority that's given the spotlight, and that gives the image that oh, this political party, there's a lot of nepotism going on, it's all dynasties and all that. But there are just a few of us... And let's not discount other capable people. I feel bad for them.

You can imagine: if I go back to my own kawasan, and I move around wearing a kain pelekat, and I have teh tarik at some stall somewhere, people look at me and say, My gosh, this guy is so humble, he's come down to the ground to join us lesser beings; he's come down from heavens, sat with us and talked with us like a normal human being.

Of course I'm a normal human being!

But if you see a local politician doing exactly the same thing, he's not at all seen as being humble; he's just being himself. What he's doing is exactly what I'm doing. I'm doing what he's doing; there's absolutely no

difference. But because of this perception, I'm the humble PM's son, and he's not.

I really feel sorry for them. These guys really have to slog it out to get somewhere.

It may sound like I'm bring self-deprecating and I have to admit, some doors are easily opened for us. But once I pass through the door, I have to perform. The worse thing for people like me is that others have very high expectations of us, and if I fall, I fall hard – and they would be absolutely disappointed. It's like, Oh, he's not like his father at all; he's the exact opposite, he's not smart enough, he's not... I don't know what... all sorts of things are going to come up. So, I have to work equally hard, I suppose.

That kind of expectation is perhaps one occupational hazard that you face. The other would be being asked to open doors for others?

I think they misunderstand, that you have this so-called political patronage. But that's

never been the case. Even when my dad was PM, it was certainly not the case as well. I still do get such requests, maybe fewer than before but you know all these brown envelopes coming up, this contract and that contract, can you see what you can do, speak to the right people... And I have to tell them that I can't guarantee that this is going to help. In fact, to be honest with them, I sometimes tell them that my getting involved could be a double-edged sword. If whoever sees my involvement as interference, then he might react quite negatively. A lot of people don't believe me but that is the truth.

You have kept a low profile until recently. Do you feel the weight of expectation on your shoulders to be the flag bearer for your father's work?

Yeah, I think I do. I now find myself spending more time trying to understand my dad's thinking. Because of all people, I'm the one who ends up defending it if someone criticises him. So if I don't understand him myself (laughs), then I'm not going to be able to do a good job. To a certain extent, I'm a sort of flag bearer and people expect me to be so.

The way I see it – maybe some people don't agree with me – wherever I go, I get a lot of goodwill that comes from the people's love for my dad. I'm fortunate to enjoy that. People don't know me at all, but they accept me. They receive me with open arms.

I don't need to introduce myself much. But after that point, then they want to get to know me better: What's this guy all about? The first thing, of course, is that I have to be my dad's son. It means I can't contradict what he has stood for all this time.

One example, say, money politics. If I were to indulge myself, then they would say, This guy's basically doing opposite of what his dad's been championing. I have to tell people that it's not for me to betray my father's trust in me, or smear his name. People can accept that. I'm very lucky in that sense. I guess I've have taken over the torch...

That is interesting, the responses to your father that's a less well-known facet of his public image...

And the goodwill that I enjoy also extends to overseas...

What was the most difficult time, if I may ask, in your father's career for you, in terms of your interaction with the public?

Definitely during the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim. That was traumatic. Not many people know what my father had to go through. You know, Anwar was considered not only his deputy, but his best friend, his confidante, his... everything. My dad had literally invested so much in him. As you know, there were two other deputies who didn't make it. In Anwar, he saw one who

could take his vision to make it reality.

We (the Mahathir children) didn't know that he was going to get sacked; we saw it on the news. All of us were in a shock. So I guess it was a natural reaction that all of us went home to Sri Perdana just to see him. And he was in such a bad state; I've never seen him so depressed. It was like a death in a family. So, we needed him to explain to us also, what had happened, and how it had come to that. He took his time in telling us everything. And I had to be the bad one to ask him the million dollar question: How is it, in 17 years you didn't notice [anything amiss]? I mean, we don't know anyone who was closer to him than that. He was getting reports [that] he totally just ignored. In fact, he chastised the IGP instead... And he was quite upset about that. I guess he was more loyal to Anwar than Anwar was loyal to him; when you want him [to succeed you] so much that you block everything out. He was not willing to listen to any negative reports. It went to that extent. That was really tough because we felt the animosity right up to the family, personally. Our own friends who were with Anwar, suddenly became our enemies. Azmin [Ali] was such a close friend; we used to see each other all the time, I used to visit him in the hospital when he was not well sometimes. We were all close friends, suddenly it was like a break-up. It was traumatic for all of us. We were close to the family, to Datin Seri Wan Azizah; she was like a sister. You cannot imagine.

For my dad to stick to the decision and try to explain it... But at that time, among the youth particularly, political awareness was at, I think, its highest. They did not understand, they felt like something was not right. So I asked my dad every single question I could think of to understand this better. I knew I was going to be asked a lot of questions by my friends, by people I don't know.

I even took it upon myself to check with some of the witnesses that he was talking about. He interviewed over 30 people, so I tried to meet up with a few of them to get first-hand accounts from them. From then on, I started talking to my friends, and invited them to meet these people also. So at least I made sure that people that were around me were equally convinced so that I could count on them to be my friends. Then we started moving around with students, explaining to them... they didn't hold back – they were very aggressive [in their questioning], very provocative, very emotional. We really needed to take time with them to explain things. It was not easy but I guess things have turned out the way they are now.

Will there be rapprochement?

In my case, in Umno Youth, I think I'll be the standard bearer to make sure Anwar doesn't come back to Umno.

Is that expected of you?

That is expected of me, and I'm assuming that responsibility wholeheartedly. And I am comfortable in it; there are many among my ex-school colleagues and my political superiors who are equally committed to this stand; that we cannot allow him back although Umno has a history of accepting back those who have betrayed us before. But for this particular one, we just can't see how this is going to happen. So far, it's been easy. No one within Umno has pushed for Umno to open its doors back to him.

Coming back to business, how do the general public, and the business community, view you and your siblings being involved in business?

Well, my father was definitely against us being in the government, whether politically or in the bureaucracy.

Politically we couldn't be active. So it was either we were to work with someone, a multinational or whatever, or go into business on our own. Whichever way, we definitely needed to earn a living like anyone else. So, it's just that most of us decided to go into business. I must say that it was really very tough for us because of this stigma. Worse still is the impression of certain people that we had access to contracts, which is furthest away from the truth.

IN MY CASE, IN UMNO YOUTH, I THINK I'LL BE THE STANDARD BEARER TO MAKE SURE ANWAR DOESN'T COME BACK TO UMNO... ALTHOUGH UMNO HAS A HISTORY OF ACCEPTING BACK THOSE WHO HAVE BETRAYED US BEFORE. BUT FOR THIS PARTICULAR ONE, WE JUST CAN'T SEE HOW THIS IS GOING TO HAPPEN.

One example, perhaps, in the case of Mokhzani right now, is Pantai. At that time [during the Asian crisis] it was the downturn; he had a lot of debt. He couldn't carry the liability anymore, and he wasn't allowed to sell to foreigners even though he was being offered good money, and eventually had to settle with his existing partner. That was the kind of political pressure that we were under. Any time we felt what we were doing, true or not, was in any way damaging my dad politically, our first reaction was to basically get out of it – we would rather lose there than to hurt him in any way politically. I think should we look back at the news reports when Mokhzani sold Tongkah and Pantai at the same time, when everyone was asking why, why? [Mokhzani] said it was to save my dad from the headache of explanation, because at the time Pantai was trying for the Fomema and [government-linked contracts]. [The decision-making process]

was all pure merit but because of him being there [in Pantai], he became something else – his position became politicised. So he said, for the good of the company, better step out, let the company go on its own. And sure enough, it did well. Now obviously when it is being sold to foreigners, it becomes an issue. When he was there he was not allowed to do that. Same with Mirzan with MISC. He had to assume such a huge liability carrying MISC. But that was his business. He knew about the shipping business, he was an expert in it. If I may say, among the siblings, he is the smartest. He attended Wharton Business School and worked with the Salomon brothers in New York; he has the right academic and professional background to do business.

But because of political expediency, he was literally forced to sell [MISC] to Petronas, and make a loss, because he wasn't allowed to sell to foreigners at the time. Were he to have done so, he would have settled all his debts. This was in the middle of the Asian economic crisis. Everyone was hurting, including us. Now, Petronas has sold some of the ships to foreigners and it's not an issue. My point is that people have certain expectations, a certain image, or impression of us being in business. If I were a government servant, and it was my responsibility to

award contracts and one of the bidders was the PM's son – even if I know that he deserves it because he's offering the best price, best quality – I have to doubly justify my decision because I don't want people to accuse me of being Mahathir's man, crony or whatever. So the guy has to work doubly hard to try and justify that. And when he does, people say that you are over-justifying... So the easiest reaction is, Let's not touch this, give it to someone else.

We end up getting that all the time. It's a catch 22 situation. I still get it right now, in my own business, because people cannot help but think that this guy is still linked, the Mahathir factor is still playing. It doesn't make my business easy; in fact it makes it harder.

But don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that I wish I didn't have the Mahathir name. I am absolutely 100% proud of it, of being his son. Absolutely proud of what he's done. But it's just that in our business, it becomes a hindrance rather than something that is helpful. ■