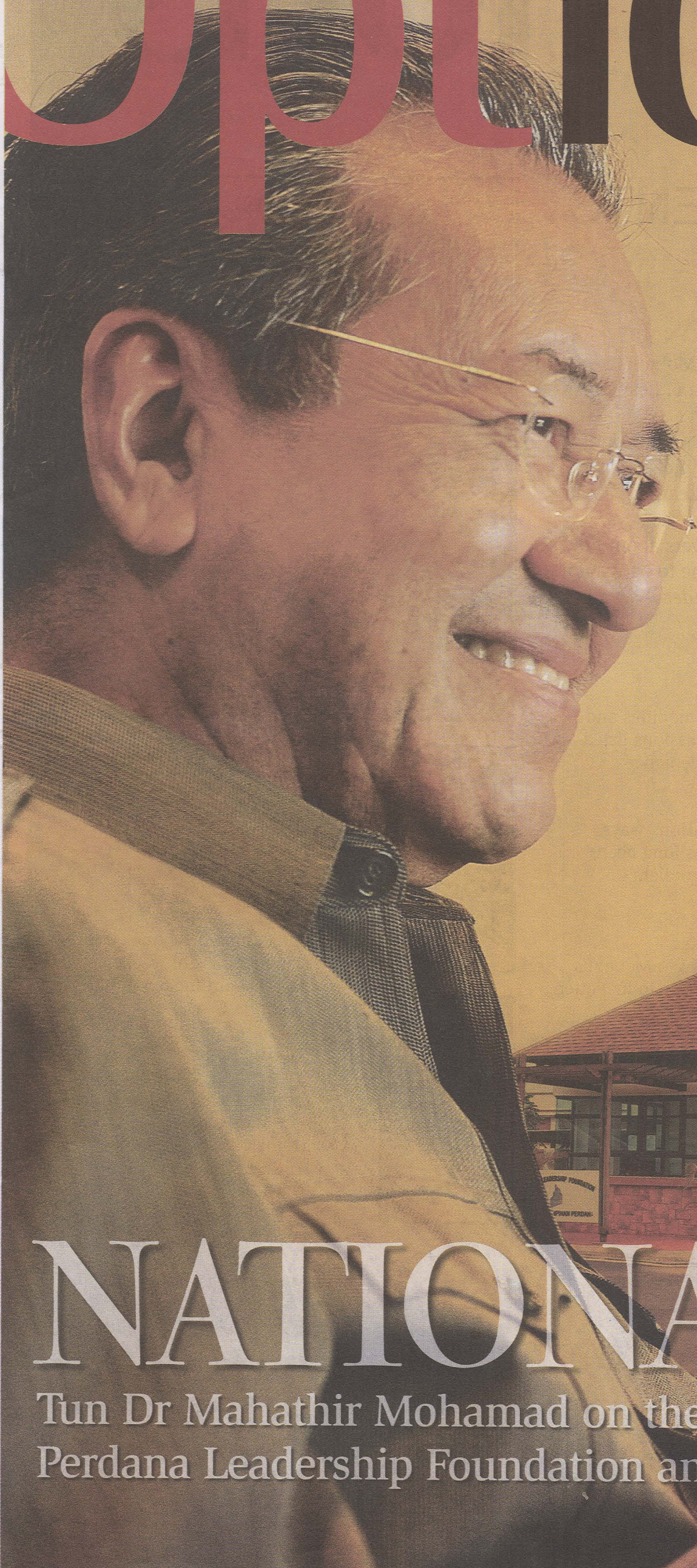


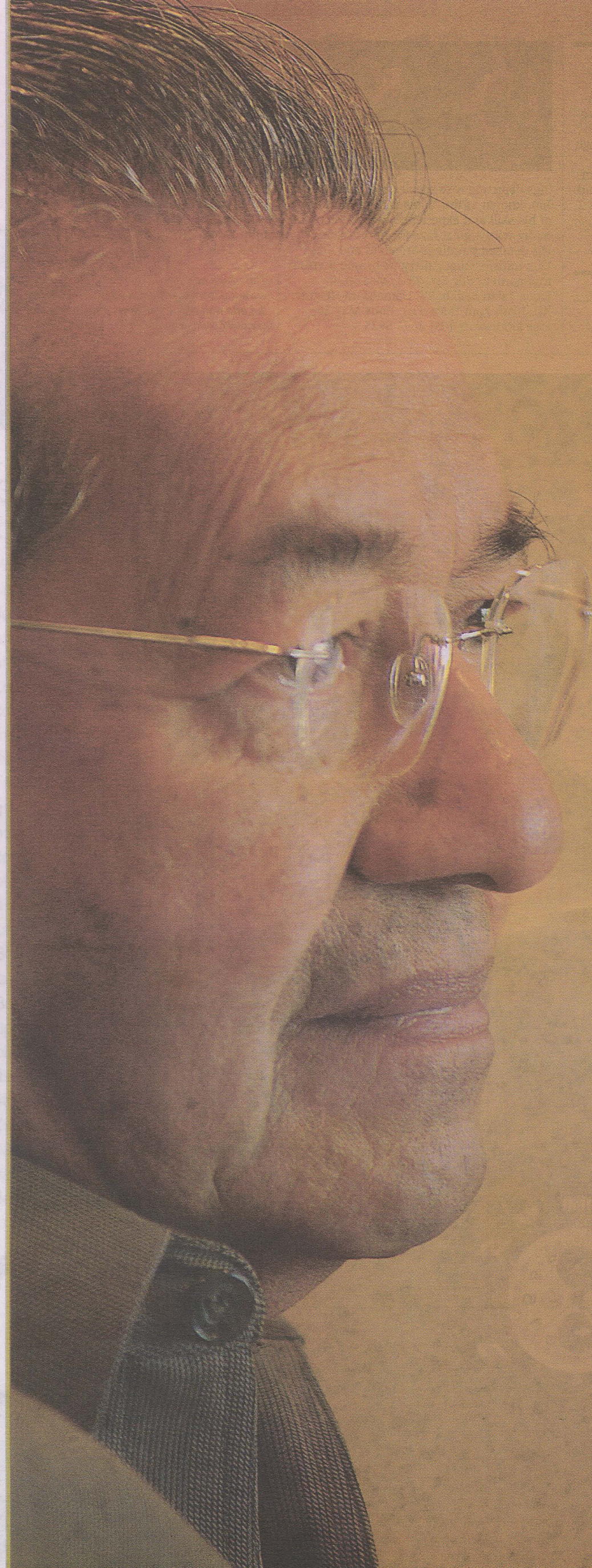
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LIFE STYLE LEISURE



## NATIONAL ICON

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the role of the Perdana Leadership Foundation and life after retirement



# National ICON

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad initiated the Perdana Leadership Foundation two years ago as a resource centre for study and research on Malaysia's former prime ministers.

Learning about their contributions, he says, will provide answers about how Malaysia has come to be what it is today. He speaks passionately about the project to

**SURINDER JESSY** and **SHEILA SINGAM**.



**W**e're both nervous. In a few minutes, we're going to interview a living legend. And not just any living legend either, but one known for his rapier wit and acerbic tongue that's been known to slice people greater than us to shreds.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad needs no introduction. Every Malaysian residing on Planet Earth knows about him. Those who've had the fortune to be in his good books will swear to what a wonderful man he is. Even those who have crossed him and lived to tell the tale bear a grudging respect for the super-sharp intellect and quickness of mind that characterise his persona. This is a man who has never suffered fools during his 22-year tenure as Malaysia's prime minister and doesn't suffer them still. Tell us we're not justified in our nervousness.

He may have retired as PM of this country, but Mahathir has not *retired*. His days are filled with the demands of the current positions he holds: adviser to Petronas and national car company Proton, and honorary president of the Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF) being the more prominent ones. In addition, he has numerous speaking engagements around the globe. Clearly, he loves to work.

The PLF is his brainchild, set up two years ago to document the contributions, policies and successes of past prime ministers of Malaysia. Since its inception, he has been very involved in the development of the foundation, spending about four days a week on matters relating to it, and seeing that the preparations for its official launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on May 10 are all in order.

It's a Friday afternoon, a couple of hours after Friday prayers and Mahathir is running a little late. Waiting with us in a sitting room just off his office suite at the spanking new PLF building in Putrajaya is *Nanyang Siang Pau* editor-in-chief Cheng Khee Chien and two of his staff. We're trying to kill time by engaging in small talk, but at the back of our minds lurks the reason for our presence here — Mahathir and his two-year old baby, the PLF. We'll be doing the interview together with the *Nanyang* team.

There's a slight bustle outside our waiting room. Ah, here he comes, dressed casually in a dark bush jacket and sandals, walking slowly and thoughtfully up the grand staircase that leads from the foyer to his suite, eschewing the more convenient lift. We catch a glimpse before he disappears into his office. We brace ourselves for the summons. He doesn't keep us waiting. Barely a few minutes later, *The Edge* and *Nanyang* teams are trooping into his office, together with PLF executive director and former Sime Darby chief executive Tan Sri Nik Mohamed Yaacob and aides.

We are face to face with the legend.

Mahathir is not a man who warms up to one upon first acquaintance. He looks very remote. As he walks to take his seat at the head of the table, we introduce ourselves, hands outstretched. He is obviously not used to such forwardness, he recoils for a moment, but recovers quickly enough to graciously acknowledge our greeting with a handshake. It is not a warm greeting, though. The handshake is perfunctory, fingertips barely touching ours, and there isn't even the hint of a smile.

It's not a reassuring welcome, but we wade right in with intrepidity and begin the interview by asking him what inspired him to set up the foundation.

"It was suggested to me. I thought it was a good idea so the foundation was set up," he replies rather abruptly. Pregnant pause. Okay, he's clearly not the type given to long, rambling answers but still, such brevity has a rather sobering effect. It's not going to be easy, but we sally forth and plunge in again. Does he have an efficient team of people ready to run the foundation, we ask brightly.

"Ya, I think right now we've got most of the people who would be running the foundation," he answers. This is tough. It's like an oral exam, where we ask the questions and he gives one-line replies. We hadn't been warned then that he takes time to warm up to people, so we're a little disappointed at the way the interview is going so far. Are these brief answers all we were going to get? Are we going to get our story?

While *The Edge* is recovering our equilibrium and deciding on a plan of action to thaw the nation's former prime minister out, *Nanyang's* Cheng pitches in with a question: "The original idea of the PLF was to set up an institution for yourself, but later on the idea changed to include the other prime ministers..."

Mahathir doesn't bat an eyelid, but we sense that he's not amused. He's been asked that question before, though, and replies with equanimity. "No. The original idea was to collect in one place the works of the previous prime ministers so that people can study... A lot of people ask questions about how Malaysia came to be what it is and we need to provide the answers. These answers can come from the study of the contributions of all the prime ministers."

The foundation is obviously a project close to his heart because we sense a slight softening in his manner as he swings into an explanation of how its archives are being set up, and how the material is being collected and collated.

"There are many sources, including private individuals and various institutions, government departments and records that have been collected," he says. The foundation has also invited the families of the past prime ministers to be involved and explained the work of the foundation and its objectives to them. "They have given an undertaking to cooperate," he adds.

Asked about his role in the foundation, Mahathir replies with characteristic dryness that it is "to preside over meetings and maybe to give any ideas I may have regarding what can be done to enhance the work of the foundation". An understatement, considering the passion and dedication with which he has undertaken the project, being involved in it right from the concept stage.

One of the PLF's main activities is the setting up and running of its library-cum-research centre, which houses a collection of books, articles, monographs, documents, video footages, slides and photographs relating to previous prime ministers of Malaysia. Mahathir himself has contributed a collection of his own books, as well as a number of personal gifts he received when he was prime minister.

He says the foundation is offering fellowships to PhD candidates to conduct specific research and studies. "The universities and colleges desirous of doing a study can come here. And it was suggested that we hold seminars and discussions on the various subjects relating to the contributions of the prime ministers. Lectures and things like that..." he explains.

The foundation has already embarked on the Perdana Discourse Series of lectures, which provides a platform for research and discussion on the leadership style and performance of the country's past prime ministers. The themes and possible topics planned for the series include national unity, social reengineering, political stability and sustainability, economic development and positioning Malaysia in the world arena.

In September, the PLF will be hosting a global leadership forum that will feature a number of internationally renowned speakers. Besides Mahathir, the list includes Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, Body Shop founder Anita Roddick and AirAsia chief executive officer Tony Fernandes.

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Mahathir reveals that while the private sector has funded the construction and maintenance of the PLF premises, more funding is now needed to run the library, employ people and pay for the Fellows who are going to study and organise seminars and discussion groups. "We have appealed to the private sector to contribute. Hopefully, they will donate and if it's possible for us to invest in some way whatever donation we receive, that will give us a source of income. This is a very costly exercise, so unless the private sector is willing to contribute rather large sums of money, it would not be possible to run this institution," he points out.

By this time, he's become rather more amenable to our questions. We decide it's an opportune moment to broach the issue of his rationale for setting up the foundation once again. Who was it who suggested the idea and why did you think it was a good idea, we ask.

"Well, it was my political secretary Matthias Chang who suggested it because it seems that the presidents of the US, upon retirement, usually have their collection of books and documents kept in the library for the presidents. I thought, since I've been asked myself a lot about Malaysia, that people are interested. And people who are interested would need a place they can go to where they can access the information. Since it was a good idea, I agreed," he replies. He admits that the foundation's resource centre may be modelled after the library of the American presidents he mentioned earlier.

Tucked away on a 1.2ha site in Putrajaya's Precinct 1, the PLF building is rather more approachable than the administrative capital's palatial edifices. The site is located beside a peaceful lake, making it conducive to research and writing. Not that Mahathir is doing much writing. Other than the numerous speeches he writes for his lecture tours, he doesn't have much time left for his memoirs.

He laughs when we ask what's happening to the memoirs. "I wish I had more time. I work practically full time. I thought I would be able to reduce the work I have to do, but I don't know... people still want to come and see me, I

The future leadership, if they want to know where the previous prime ministers have gone wrong and what they shouldn't do, they can use this foundation to study that so-and-so did this, this was the policy of that prime minister and what happened after that. Then they will not commit mistakes

don't know what for. And newspapers want to interview me and ask me a lot of embarrassing questions," he replies. Now we're beginning to see a bit of the famously candid side. Right, he's thawing out, appearing more relaxed.

"I try to write my memoirs but I haven't got very far because I spend most of my time writing speeches for these invitations that I get in the country and outside," he continues.

We're eager to know what the speeches are about.

"Basically, they are curious to know about how Malaysia has been able to grow since Independence, in particular the transition from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial economy. And they are interested in race relations in Malaysia; they are also interested in the administrative set-up and in fact, they are interested in how Malaysia came to develop the way it does.

"I talk on different aspects. Some Muslim countries ask me to talk about the role of Islam and how it is we can manage Islam in the context of a multiracial, multi-religious country. They ask whether we have Muslim extremists and how is it that Muslims can actually run a country," he explains.

How does he go about gathering material for his speeches? "Depends. If it is with regard to the performance of Malaysia, I know it very well, from the time before Independence. I've been around now for almost 80 years, so I've gone through quite a lot.

"I remember the time when we were under British rule, under Japanese rule, under Thai rule, British Military Administration. All these things I have gone through myself," says Mahathir, who was born and bred in Kedah.

He admits that he enjoys delivering the speeches. "I enjoy meeting people and talking to people. They want to know and they ask me questions. It's just like you wanting to interview me... I can very well say no, I'm not going to see you. But on the other hand, the request is there so I thought that maybe there is something they would like to know."

He writes his own speeches. Asked why a man of his stature does not engage a speech writer, he says with a wry smile: "They won't sound like me. I am a nasty person. People cannot be as nasty as myself, so I have to write nasty speeches all by myself." Laughter fills the room. The ice is finally broken.

We press on about the memoirs. Clearly, Mahathir's autobiography is something the world awaits with bated breath and we're keen to know when we can expect it to hit the bookstores.

"I really don't know because it's not coming. It's not flowing freely and I have to gather a lot of information, data. I have some staff helping me but

to relate [the information] and correlate it and write a coherent story is not something I do often. Especially about myself. Writing about myself is much more difficult than writing nasty things about other people," he smiles.

By this time, we've become more comfortable in his presence. About time, too. Clearly, this is a man who takes time to warm up to people. Not surprising, considering the amount of criticism he has been faced with during his 22-year tenure as the nation's prime minister. Today, for the first time, we are face to face with the flesh-and-blood person behind the brusque, larger-than-life persona we've seen on TV or read about in the newspapers. We're getting a glimpse of Mahathir the man, not Mahathir the icon. We find ourselves warming up to him in response, especially when he admits that he wishes he could spend more time with his children and grandchildren.

"Initially, I planned to work only in the morning and keep the afternoons to myself. But I find I cannot do very much in the morning with a lot of people coming to see me, so now I work in the evening and it goes on like before, finishing at six o'clock... I don't have much time for my children but I'm going to force myself to see them regularly," he says, his expression softening at the last bit.

He obviously has almost as full a schedule as he did when he was prime minister. What's the point of retiring then?

He laughs. "I think if you stay too long, people get bored with you and they'll want to kick you out. Before they kick you out, you better remove yourself. Everybody becomes unpopular over time, no matter how good you are, how much you work. It's human nature," he replies pragmatically. His tone is matter-of-fact; there is no reproach in the answer, no bitterness towards his critics.

Cheng interjects with a question on whether he thinks Gerakan president Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik and MIC president Datuk Seri Samy Vellu have stayed for too long. It's a good try, but Mahathir is obviously not going to be caught up in that [political] argument.

"That is their choice. Maybe they are more popular than me," he remarks with a wry smile.

He says he doesn't miss the limelight now that's he's retired from the nation's highest office. "Normally, I don't like publicity but as a prime minister, I had to face it. But now I don't have to, so I'm back to normal actually," he shares.

But surely he misses politics?

He ponders for a moment. "Well, in a way of course you are used to politics and you have ideas and feelings. Whether I like it or not, I know I cannot be involved in politics anymore so I have to accept it."

We ask if he will share some of his happiest moments with us. He chuckles. "I have to think very hard," he says with obvious amusement. "Well, I think being able to serve and see the results of what you've set out to do gives you... not the happiest moments... but gives you satisfaction."

Any regrets?

It's obvious that he is by now quite comfortable with us. He meets the question with equanimity. There are no searching glances for any hidden innuendos. We have none, except to genuinely probe his personal thoughts and feelings. Enough has been said about everything else.

"Well, some regrets of course. I made mistakes, there were things I should have done in a better way but did not... things like that," he admits.

Watching Mahathir's changing expressions — the remote façade has dropped completely by now — it strikes us how youthful he looks for an octogenarian. How do you keep yourself so youthful and active, we can't help blurting out.

He throws his head back and laughs with delight. "I was waiting for that question to come. Actually, I swallow a wonderful pill which makes me young," he replies with a huge smile. Pauses to take in our reaction.

"Well that's what people want to hear when they ask that question. If you tell them that you have to do this, that and the other, it's very tedious. They don't want to hear that," he continues.

"One lady caught me in the supermarket and asked if it is true that I spend RM5,000 a day getting these fantastic injections to keep me young. RM5,000 a day is a lot of money...," he says, appearing a little bemused at people's perception of him.

According to people who know him well, such as Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik, whom *Options* interviewed a few weeks ago, Mahathir practises healthy lifestyle

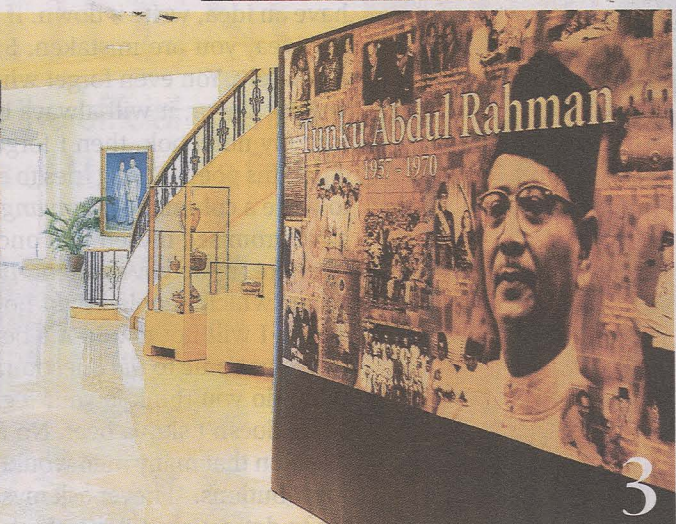
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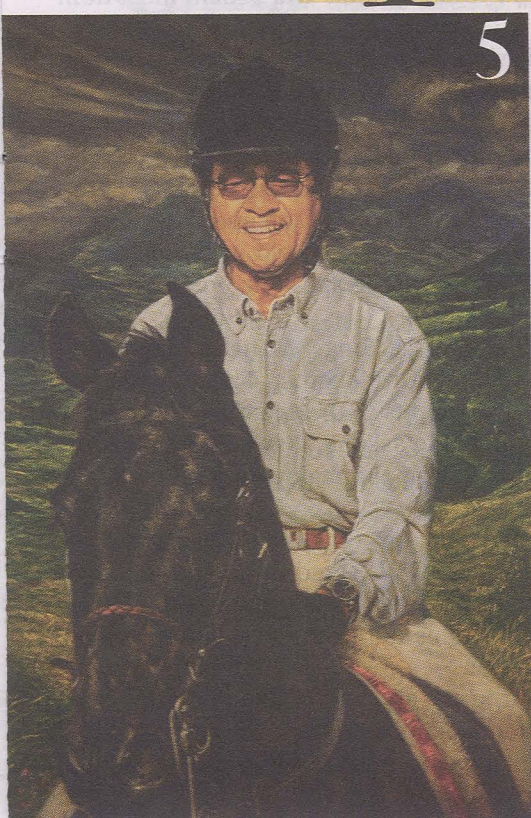
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1, 2 & 3 The collection of pictures at the gallery of the Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF) in Putrajaya  
4 Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak browsing through some of Mahathir's collection of books and pictures at the official launch last Tuesday  
5 A picture from Mahathir's private collection shows him riding in Argentina  
6 The impressive staircase at the entrance of the PLF  
7 The library

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habits that have helped him remain fit and healthy. In the interview, Ling said: "We must all learn from Dr Mahathir. He has great discipline when it comes to eating and what I have learnt from him is to not finish the food you're served." We quote this remark to Mahathir and he laughs.

"Ya, people don't like to sit beside me when they are having their dinners because they see that I don't finish my food. I think everything must be in moderation. Whatever it is that you do, whether it is games, food or it is having a good time, moderation is the best answer. And you must try and reduce the stress.

"I eat everything, but I don't eat much, that's all. Very difficult task, because people want to feed me until the food comes out of my gills."

He also offers advice on how to keep fresh and active despite a hectic travel schedule — sleep while flying.

"Because of the invitations, I have been going to Dubai, to Sudan, to Syria. I come back, go to Sri Lanka, come back, go to Bosnia... I do a lot of travelling... China, Korea, Japan," he reveals. He doesn't get tired because "I sleep. I sleep on the plane".

"That's why I'm able to come back and start work immediately, I don't seem to rest. But on the plane, I sleep sometimes 10 hours — from London to here, non-stop flight, I go to sleep," he explains.

We ask if he's ever missed medical practice. "In a way, yes. You are trained as a doctor, but I find that politics — running the country — is almost like practising medicine, so I get my kicks out of doing all those things," he says rather conversationally.

Politics is like medicine? How?

"Well, in medicine, you have a sick person and you follow a certain procedure to determine what he is suffering from. Once you know what he is suffering from, you think of the best way to treat him. Of course, he may recover, but unfortunately, he may die also.

"It's the same with running the country. You see problems, you determine what the problem is all about. Then, having determined the problem, you work out what is the best medicine," he illustrates.

Using his analogy, we ask if he is satisfied with the treatment he has applied to the nation's problems.

"Ya... I am satisfied, but other people may not be satisfied," he replies calmly.

"I am satisfied that I have effected the cure," he reiterates. "But of course other people may say that I have probably damaged a lot more things or that I have done the wrong things. They are entitled to their opinion, I'm entitled to mine." This is said without any rancour.

Whatever leisure time he has is spent reading or writing, he reveals. "Either I'm writing or I'm reading. I'm never sitting down doing nothing. I don't watch TV because I like to be doing things, not just sitting down watching things being done, that's why I don't see games, I don't even go to the cinema, I find it very dull," he shares, almost apologetically.

He is still a keen equestrian and tries to pursue the interest at least once a week when he's in the country. "But when I go to Argentina, then I can ride every day, morning and evening for days... that's when I really get to ride," he says.

He also retains the habit of carrying a notebook to jot down his observations. That's probably why people credit him with having an elephant's memory and remarkable powers of observation. It's all in the little notebook. It's a habit that many of his protégés in the government emulate.

"All these people carry these notebooks because of me. But I lost my notebook," he admits ruefully.



Never trust your memory. If you see something interesting, write it down. If you have an idea, write it down. If you think that you can remember the idea, you are mistaken. Sometimes, you forget almost immediately. You even forget what you are going to say. But if you write it down, it will always be there. Except that sometimes I lose my notebook, then I forget.

He gives his rationale for the notebook. "Never trust your memory. If you see something interesting, write it down. If you have an idea, write it down. If you think that you can remember the idea, you are mistaken. Sometimes, you forget almost immediately. You even forget what you are going to say. But if you write it down, it will always be there. Except that sometimes I lose my notebook, then I forget," he shares.

At this point, Cheng tries to elicit a commitment from Mahathir to write a column for *Nanyang*. "No time," he laughs. "Besides I have promised myself that once I have stepped down, I will not interfere in the government. If I start writing, I might be saying things which people might not like to hear and that I promised myself I will not do. So it's better for me not to write."

We've come to the question. We watch him closely as we ask: What do you think is your legacy to this nation?

He doesn't skip a beat. No mulling over a thought-provoking question that many men would use as a platform to trumpet their contributions. "I never ask myself what is my legacy. It is for people to determine. I don't think about it," he replies promptly.

We try again. How would you like to be remembered?

He's not fooled. The rapier wit is as alert as ever to the circuitous ways of journalists, whom he has had a lifetime of dealing with. "Yes... it's the same question," he retorts lightly.

"Frankly I don't care if people remember me or not. That is why almost the first thing I did on becoming Minister of Education was to stop the practice of naming schools after the Minister of Education. Prior to that, every Minister of Education had schools named after them, sometimes after their wives also. But I put a stop to that. When I became prime minister, I stopped people from giving names to anything if they are still alive. If they like their names to be given to anything, they have to die first. Unless of course, they are Sultans and all that... then you can give names," he continues.

"So, my name," he says, "is not anywhere. But I admit now I am under pressure from people who keep on wanting me to give my name. They might think I am too proud, so I have allowed my name to be used for certain things."

Coming back to the PLF, we ask him who he thinks will benefit most from the foundation.

"Future generations. The future leadership, if they want to know where the previous prime ministers have gone wrong and what they shouldn't do, they can use this foundation to study that so-and-so did this, this was the policy of that prime minister and what happened after that. Then they will not commit mistakes."

He says that's the purpose of holding seminars to discuss the roles of the various prime ministers. He pauses to check with Nik Mohamed on some of the impending lectures; there is apparently one being held in collaboration with UiTM on May 25 where he (Mahathir) will be speaking on social engineering.

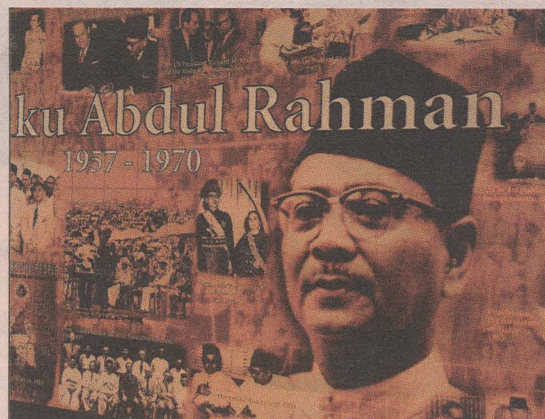
"This UiTM has made me sound like Mao Tse Tung," Mahathir complains mildly. "They put it down as the 'Thoughts of Dr Mahathir'. The only thing is they haven't produced the book on the 'Thoughts of Dr Mahathir'. They did it without my permission, they never bothered to ask me, they just put it down. They are studying the 'Thoughts of Dr Mahathir'. I imagine one day my brain will be scanned..." he jokes.

Yes, he's at the joking stage. Unfortunately, our time is up. We thank him for his time and he politely thanks us in turn. We stand up to say goodbye. This time the handshake is firmer, and it's accompanied by a warm smile. The barrier is gone. As a parting shot, he looks us full in the face and murmurs "The cutting Edge" before making his exit.

We leave his office in high humour, a far cry from when we entered it. Forty-five minutes may not be enough for some people to form an impression of another, but we leave feeling good that we have managed to glimpse a little more of the man behind the façade of a national icon. **E**

# INSPIRING LEADERS

In conjunction with the official opening of the Perdana Leadership Foundation, we offer snapshots of Malaysia's first three Prime Ministers



## **TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN PUTRA (1957-1970)**

Known as the Father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman was instrumental in bringing our country out from under the shadow of British colonial rule towards independence.

The young Tunku already showed the makings of a true leader when he established the Malay Association of Great Britain upon discovering that Malay students were not being represented by any organisation. Having experienced racial discrimination while studying at Cambridge University from no less than the college's administration, racial equality was an issue close to his heart. The campaign for racial equality was a mere seed that burgeoned into a passionate desire to see his homeland, Malaya, become an independent state free from the British yoke.

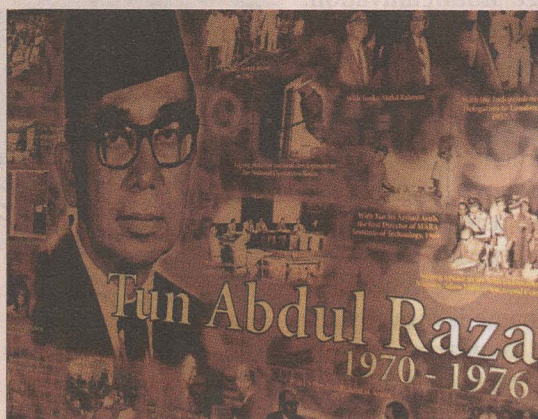
Throughout his years in England, he had formed friendships with people from various nations, along the way gaining the skills of diplomacy and political savvy. Soon after he received his legal qualification from the Inner Temple in England, he returned and was made chairman of the United Malays National Organisation (Umno). On Aug 26, 1951, he succeeded Datuk Onn Jaafar as president of Umno.

Seeking strength in numbers, he travelled around Malaya meeting people of various ethnic roots and promoting unity and cooperation. This spawned the Alliance Party (Parti Perikatan), comprising Umno, the Malayan Chinese Association and Malayan Indian Congress, which, under his leadership, was able to win the country's first general election in July 1955 (51 out of 52 parliamentary seats).

The Tunku was then made Chief Minister and Minister of Home Affairs, and in 1956, led a delegation to London for discussions with the British government on matters concerning the independence of Malaya. The meeting brought forth the signing of the Independent Treaty at Lancaster House on Feb 8, 1956, whereby the British relinquished their jurisdiction over Malaya. On Aug 31, 1957, Malaya was declared an independent state and Tunku Abdul Rahman became the first Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya.

Four years later, the Tunku proposed a federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei. On July 9, 1963, all but Brunei joined, and Malaysia was born (two years later, Singapore withdrew peacefully).

The Tunku was succeeded by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.



## **TUN ABDUL RAZAK HUSSEIN (1970-1976)**

It was only natural that Tun Abdul Razak would be called into politics. Even as a young law student in England, he was a member of the British Labour Party and a prominent student leader of the Malay Association of Great Britain. He also founded an organisation called the Malayan Forum, which gave Malayan students a platform to discuss their country's political issues. After receiving a degree from Lincoln's Inn in England, he returned to join the Malayan civil service.

His political prowess was honed over the years. In 1950, he became the youth chief of Umno. In 1952, he worked as the assistant state secretary of Pahang and subsequently became the chief minister of Pahang in February 1955. He was only 33 years old. In July that same year, following the country's first general election, he was appointed Minister of Education. In the 1959 general election, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence.

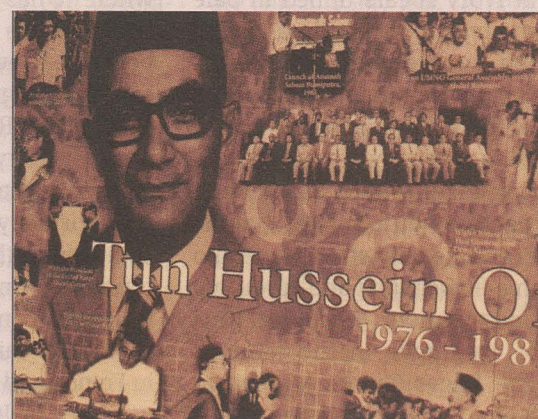
By this time, the country was barely coming out of its infancy and faced a lot of political and economical instability. On May 13, 1969, Malaysia had seen its worst ever racial rioting; the Malays resented the economic success of the Chinese and the Chinese resented the political power of the Malays. A state of emergency was declared and the Constitution and Parliament were suspended. In 1970, Tun Razak replaced the Tunku as the second Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The seeds for Tun Razak's role in the building of our nation were planted long before Malaysia was formed. He was one of those who won a seat out of the 51 seats in the first Malayan general election that subsequently led to the relinquishing of British power. He was also one of the members of the delegation that led to the signing of the Independent Treaty.

Tun Razak was also known as the Father of Development. As Prime Minister, he masterminded and implemented the Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, a 20-year plan that was seen to be a rather ambitious and controversial socio-economic restructuring programme. The goal was to eradicate poverty and restructure the economy to eliminate the identification of ethnicity with economic function. The NEP fuelled hope for a better balance in wealth distribution among the races.

In his attempts to build national unity, he also promoted the use of the Malay language as the principal official language. Under his government, the multiparty alliance called the National Front, the successor to the Alliance Party, was created in 1974 to unite the Malay, Chinese and Islamic groups.

Tun Abdul Razak died in office on Jan 15, 1976. He bequeathed his political legacy to his son, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Malaysia's current Deputy Prime Minister.



## **TUN HUSSEIN ONN (1976-1981)**

Tun Hussein Onn was a military man, having joined the Johor Military Forces at the age of 18 and a year later, the Indian Military Academy. During World War II, he was absorbed into the Indian army and served in the Middle East. Because of his experience in the war, the British employed him as an instructor at the Malayan Police Recruiting and Training Centre in Rawalpindi.

Upon his return to Malaya in 1945, he was appointed Commandant of the Johor Baru Police Depot. He then joined the Malayan civil service as an administrative officer in Segamat, and was later appointed district officer of Klang and Kuala Selangor.

In 1949, he became the first youth chief of Umno, a party his father Datuk Onn Jaafar helped establish. The following year, he was elected Umno secretary-general but left in 1951 to help his father form the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). When the party lost its momentum, Tun Hussein left for London to study law at Lincoln's Inn. He qualified as a Barrister-at-Law and came back a certified lawyer, practising in Kuala Lumpur.

It took some convincing on Tun Razak's part for Tun Hussein to rejoin politics. Tun Hussein rejoined Umno in 1968 and stood in the 1969 general election. He won and was appointed Minister of Education. His rise in politics was steady and in 1973, he succeeded Tun Dr Ismail as the Deputy Prime Minister. When Tun Razak passed away in 1976, Tun Hussein became the third Prime Minister.

Tun Hussein Onn is remembered as the Father of Unity. He was known for continually stressing on the issue of unity. The government developed many policies targeted at rectifying economic imbalances between the communities. Many of his efforts were concentrated on promoting goodwill and unity among the various communities, planting the seeds of what we call today the Malaysian spirit of "muhibbah". Under his leadership, the National Unit Trust Scheme (Amanah Saham Nasional) was launched on April 20, 1981. He also promoted and applied the principles of the Rukun Tetangga and championed the anti-drug cause.

On July 17, 1981, he retired from active politics and stepped down as Prime Minister due to health concerns. He was succeeded by Malaysia's fourth and longest-serving Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad.