



Bidding
Farewell
To A

Great Leader

It is never easy to say goodbye – what more when a whole generation of Malaysians grew up not knowing any other Prime Minister but Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. So, after 22 years at the helm of Government, he has called it a day.

The straight-talking doctor-turned-politician is controversial by any standard. Indeed, during his last month in power, his addresses to the 10th Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summits drew both accolades and criticisms. Yet, few know that Dr Mahathir is actually a soft-spoken man who is extremely courteous by nature.

A KADIR JASIN, who has known Dr Mahathir since 1964, recollects some interesting aspects about him.

Where do I begin?

To tell the story of how great a love can be
The sweet love story that is older than the sea
The simple truth about the love he brings to me
Where do I start?

SO goes part of the theme song (albeit with a slight change) from the 1970 movie *Love Story*, starring Ryan O'Neil and Ali McGraw. It was a must-see for every love-struck young man and woman of the time.

The song was one of modern day's equivalent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the love between a rich law student from Boston, Oliver (O'Neil), and a poor college student from Rhode Island, Jenny (McGraw), ends tragically when the latter dies from a fatal illness.

Set against the background of an Ivy League university, the movie was an antithesis of the time, when campuses were torn apart by the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Jenny's silver-screen death was surpassed in its tragic gravity only by the bloody death of four protesting Kent State University students who were shot by the State National Guard troopers on May 4 of that year.

It was also an uncertain time for Malaysia that had just emerged from the traumatic experience of the May 13, 1969 race riots. It was, to say the least, not the best of times for a fire-breathing medical doctor-turned-politician by the name of Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad to be kicking up a storm.

But kick up a storm he did — challenging the norm and questioning conventional wisdom that, among other things, earned him an expulsion from Umno and the label, 'Malay ultra'.

His may not be a love story and cer-

tainly not a tragedy, but a great story nevertheless — the story of Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, his life and times.

(From here on we shall refer to him simply as Dr Mahathir. That's what he told the *Mingguan Malaysia* newspaper what he wanted to be known as when he stepped down as Prime Minister some time ago — even if he were to be made a 'Tun'.)

So where do we begin to tell his story? From the day he was born?

Why not? There is even a story to this — he was born in Alor Star, Kedah and he has two birthdays: one when he was actually born, and the other when his birth

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was registered some time later. Officially, his birthday is given as Dec 20, 1925.

He is the son of a schoolteacher, Master Mohamad Iskandar. The story has it that Mohamad Iskandar was a strict disciplinarian — a standard trait of teachers then. Thus, the young Dr Mahathir was raised in a no-nonsense environment of a teacher's family that turned out to be a blessing.

Those days, being born into a teacher's household was in itself a guarantee of good upbringing and proper education. In that sense, Dr Mahathir had a head start. This explains the speedy development of his civic and political consciousness.

In his mid-teens, when other boys were busy discovering the mysteries of the birds and the bees, he was already active in Saberkas — short for *Sayang Akan Bangsa Ertinya Redha Korban Apa Segala*. Roughly translated it means, 'For the Love of the Race, the People Must be

Prepared to Make the Highest Sacrifice'.

The Kedah-based Saberkas was one of the many Malay-led organisations formed to oppose the British' s post-World War II plan to strengthen its hold on Malaya via the formation of the Malayan Union.

He was co-opted at such a young age because he could read and write well, thus was handy as a note-taker. He was also disciplined and systematic.

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As a medical doctor, punctuality can literally be a question of life and death. He told this writer of an occasion in the fifties, when he had a very sick patient delivered to his doorstep at the doctors' quarters of the Langkawi Hospital.

In his *sarong* and singlet, he diagnosed the man — a Chinese fishing boat owner — to be suffering from strangulated hernia that required immediate surgery.

If he sent the man to Alor Star for treatment, he might die on the way. But to operate on him in Langkawi, the young doctor had only basic surgical instrument. So he rushed to Alor Star by boat — the only means of travel in those days — for additional equipment.

MALAY WOMEN MAKE THEIR OWN FREEDOM

POLITICALLY and economically, Malays throughout the country are making rapid strides, hoping to gain in one or two generations what ground they have lost during past decades from their *tiada apa* attitude. Close on the heels of this economic and political progress comes the disturbing question of social reforms as well. At the moment, political bodies, busy with constitutional problems, are able to excuse themselves from attending to this thorny question, but sooner or later the excuse will fail them. And when that time comes, the thorniest question will be the emancipation of Malay women.

From the times when Malays professed the Hindu religion, their women folk have been confined to the kitchen. Conversion to Islam only served to strengthen the already stringent

The operation was successful and Ai Huat lived for a good many years. Until today, his widow still shows her gratitude by sending Dr Mahathir salted fish.

Thus, punctuality and quick decision become Dr Mahathir's forte. He often told his audience that he managed politics a bit like he practised medicine. 'If I had to amputate your hand or leg to save your life, I would not hesitate to do it,' he would say.

Thus, since leading Umno and the government in 1981, Dr Mahathir had amputated many arms and legs from the party and government, and introduced some very bitter medicine to the people. But he also brought good health and comfortable living to them.

His childhood dream was to become a lawyer. But being good in science, he was awarded a scholarship to study medicine at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

But that did not stop him from expressing his views. The lawyer in him had propelled him towards writing. Thus by 1946, in between cutting up cadavers and falling in love, he took up writing by contributing articles to *The Straits Times* and *The Sunday Times*.

He did not write about medicine or the love affair of a young medical student, though his story was almost similar to that

of Oliver and Jenny. He was the down-town son of a schoolteacher and she the daughter of a senior civil servant from Selangor's upper crust.

Instead, he wrote about such politically inspired subjects as the future of the Malays in higher education, the need to standardise the Malay language, the participation of women in politics and the

ban on social contact between the sexes and non-religious education for women. Even when the country was opened up to Chinese and other immigrants, segregation was still practised. The newcomers were strict believers in the efficacy of the moral code, which relegated women to the kitchen, as were the indigenous inhabitants. But after the termination of the First World War, the Chinese population decided to discard racial conventions and adopt modern Western culture. The dewey-eyed 'Lotus Flowers', once so provokingly shy, were emancipated and became the objects of envy to Malay boys and girls.

For a time, Malay parents stuck to traditions and eyed with severe disapproval any modernistic trend among their children. Religious teachings were intensified and a campaign was



Dr Mahathir during a visit to the recent Expo OIC 2003

started to make the word 'modern' as odious as possible. Vernacular papers took up the cry against the wickedness of Western culture and it was not uncommon even to hear stage comedians satirising the few unconventionalities that had become evident. Perhaps even the diehard among orthodox Malays realised change was inevitable. Slowly and with much trepidation, customs and traditions were jettisoned. But it was not until the post-war years that the great extent of social reforms to be carried out was fully appreciated.

For the first time in the placid history of the Malays, they were threatened with total extinction and when they decided to take the bull by the horns, they found unexpected inspiration in their womenfolk. With fervent nationalism and sympathetic understanding, schoolgirls

and matrons, wives and young girls goaded their menfolk into a bitter struggle for national existence. Together they mounted the platforms; together they preached and appealed for unity of aims and actions. At the first Pan-Malayan Malay Congress at Kuala Lumpur, a schoolgirl of about 11 read a heart-rending address which brought the assembled delegates to tears and invoked a resolution never to give up until success is achieved.

In the efforts to raise adequate funds to finance the struggle, Malay women excelled with their knitting exhibitions, flower sales and stage shows. They were always ready to do service to their community. Though never interested in sports, they attended largely any football match in aid of national funds. Even in the main political arena they took a hand. Negri

poverty of Malay rice farmers. He developed an early liking for politics and commerce. At 16, he was already an active organiser of Saberkas, doing anything from putting up anti-Malayan Union posters to staging a play that condemned the high-handedness of the British. The *sandiwara* (traditional Malay the-

COVER STORY

atre) was called *Gagah Hitam*, in which he played a crusading black raven. His act of heroism climaxed in the rescue of a damsel in distress.

He also dabbled in small business, selling banana fritters at Pekan Rabu in Alor Star. The two teenage endeavours would play an important role in shaping Dr Mahathir's view of politics and business.

While other Malay professionals were satisfied being in the familiar turf of civil service, the young Dr Mahathir was restless. First of all, he liked business. Secondly, with his mind set on politics, being a government doctor did not hold much hope for advancing his political ambition.

Thus in 1957 — the year of independence — he liberated himself from the civil service and started his own clinic in Alor Star, becoming the first Malay doctor to go into private practice in the town.

Locating his Maha Clinic in Alor Star's Pekan Melayu, a stone's throw away from the Kedah River, could not have been more deliberate. It was pregnant with symbolism.

This was because by the time he set up shop, 'Pekan Melayu' had become a misnomer. There were no Malay traders left. Except for a handful of Indian textile and sundry shops, the Malay quarter was exclusively Chinese.

Setting himself up in a Chinese area gave him the client base and an opportunity to learn from the Chinese. Those days, few Malays could afford private medical services and fewer still were in business. But Dr Mahathir would later confess that while he was successful in attracting clients, he was always in the red at the end of the month because he was bad at bookkeeping.

But that experience led him to author the *Panduan Perniagaan Kecil* (Guide To Small Business) published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in the mid-Seventies, in which he set out basic rules — including on good bookkeeping — for the successful conduct of a business, aimed at the Malay traders. It was Dr Mahathir's first book.

Going into private practice was the risk he believed he had to take if he wanted to be active in politics. His resignation from government service to set up a private practice attracted considerable attention — not least from the then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra.

In 1964, with Tunku's consent, Dr Mahathir was chosen as the Alliance (the predecessor to Barisan Nasional) candidate for the Kota Star Selatan parliamentary constituency, a rural rice-farming community southeast of Alor Star.

He won with a huge majority over his

hope to open the eyes of the Malays with unstinting sacrifices in every field of national endeavour. It is up to the men and especially the fathers, to realise that they can no longer confine their womenfolk to the kitchen. To keep in step with the ideas and interest of their husbands, Malay women must be well educated. The time is at hand when young Malays can no longer tolerate nit-witted wives, and when a sound education is a greater asset to the prospective bride than reputation for shyness and delicacy.

Who would want a wife who is unable to carry herself with unself-conscious propriety at social functions and who is always exposed to ridicule? Who would like to go home to a wife who doesn't understand and cannot sympathise with one's business and political problems? Who would like to be accompanied with a slatternly, ungainly wife who gapes at everything because she has been confined so

DISPARITIES: HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS NEEDED

THE tone of all the letters commenting on my reply to 'Student' on *bumiputera* and the University indicates a general unwillingness to face up to the problem that plagues this country of many races. The whole attention of your readers seems riveted to the pros and cons of the system of admission into the University. Surely it must be obvious that I am more concerned with the end result of this system in terms of race relations rather than its virtues or vices as a system.

Underneath the seemingly harmonious relationship between the races in Malaysia there is already a potential for violence. The Penang riots are a testimony to this pent-up reservoir of ill-feelings. The task of the Government as well as the people should be to appreciate this and to initiate remedies.

Generalisations are not disproved by citing the particular. There are urban Malays as there are rural Chinese. There are good schools for the Malays as there are bad schools for the Chinese. And of course there are rich Malays as there are poor Chinese. But all these exceptions do not prove that the general picture that I painted is wrong. No one in his right mind can deny that the towns in Malaysia are predominantly Chinese and their per capita income are higher than the Malays who dominate the rural areas.

There is here a distinct and deep cleavage which does not appear to be offset by the particular instances quoted by your readers. Indeed,

long to a coconut shell that she knows nothing of the world outside? Unless social reforms are carried out, and that quickly, Malay girls would be in danger of being neglected and despised by boys of their own race.

A sound education and through knowledge of modern housecraft should be made available to Malay girls. Religious teaching designed to enable them to distinguish between the good and evil of Western culture must be initiated. Let all Malay parents admit the inevitability of these reforms and take an active part in them. In time to come, they will realise that it pays to do so. And as for the political bodies, they must shape a definite policy immediately on social problems or else their cherished economic and political advancement would be top-heavy and detrimental to their race in the long run. (July 20, 1947 — from the book *The Early Years, 1947-1972, a compilation of writings by Dr Mahathir Mohamad.*)

these isolated instances merely serve to highlight the division. For example, if there are rich Malays, why are there so few of them as compared to the Chinese? If there are good schools for Malays, why are there fewer of them than for the Chinese? The problem obviously is one of racial disparity, accentuated by class disparity. A solution that merely alleviates class disparity will not necessarily solve racial disparity.

Adolf A. Berie, in his book, *The American Economic Republic*, remarked that 'students of history have repeatedly been impressed by the fact that economic systems, otherwise comparable, progress at different speeds'. Describing the different rates of progress between the states of Nevada and Utah, he attributed this to a 'transcendental margin' which is the product of value systems in human communities. In Malaysia, one can say off-hand that the 'transcendental margin' differs between the *bumiputera* and the non-*bumiputera*. Because of their differing sets of values, a comparable system or policy will not produce identical results in the urban Chinese and the rural Malay communities. A programme of alleviating poverty alone will therefore not help to remove racial disparity. In fact it is likely to accentuate this disparity as was evident in the former Straits Settlements where Malays and Chinese were treated equally by the British but showed a striking difference in progress in all fields.

Incidentally it is worth noting that Sino-Malay riots have occurred only in Penang and Singapore but never in Kelantan or Trengganu. In independent Malaysia, the Government has taken this factor into consideration and has continued or initiated programmes that appear to favour the *bumiputera*. The policy has paid off but such is the degree of disparity between the races, the division between town and country, race and race continues. Worse still, the political sophistication of the *bumiputera* has sharpened their appreciation of the situation. Much more needs to be done if the racial disparity is to be reduced and the potential for violence diminished. University entrance is but one small facet of a massive problem. However, unless it is attended to it will aggravate and complicate the existing racial disparity.

What I suggested in Parliament does not even amount to the quota system for foreign students in overseas universities. One of your readers said that even brilliant students find difficulty in getting places in some foreign universities because of a reduction in quota. The fact that there is a quota means that competition is between foreign students. It is ridicu-

lous to think that Harvard, which gets every year a huge list of applicants comprising the best American students, cannot fill all available places with Americans. Yet Harvard takes in a large number of foreign students, some of whom can hardly speak English. The policy, as I said, is deliberate.

Whether there will be more or fewer drop-outs will depend upon teaching and standards. Repeat students from the Faculty of Medicine in Singapore have been known to get distinctions when they left to continue in other universities. Applicants rejected from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya have gone to study medicine abroad and are doing extremely well. Students who failed repeatedly in Singapore are now respected specialists holding post-graduate qualification from universities abroad. On the other hand, 'distinction kids' have failed their pre-medical course while brilliant graduates have failed to get foreign post-graduate qualifications. At least one distinguished professor failed to obtain M.R.C.P. London. It can be seen that examination results are not the perfect criteria that they are made out to be.

To correct the imbalance in the progress of the different communities in Malaysia requires both immediate and long-term measures. Improving rural schools, rural health, etc. are long-term measures that are already being carried out but are subject to the transcendental margin that I spoke of. In the meantime, short-term measures must also be taken. The task before this nation is a tricky and delicate one. Not only must class disparity be reduced but racial disparity and division must also be removed. The Government is doing a lot but it is not enough that the Government should do things. It is also necessary that the people should realise this and make helpful suggestions. Adopting an attitude of hurt-righteousness is not going to help anyone.

In America, Britain, Africa and neighbouring countries, racial intolerance leading to riots and violence has become a feature. If we are not to join them it would be wise to learn from them the etiology, the signs and the symptoms. It would be wiser to institute preventive measures now rather than wait for the actual event. Being in close contact with the rural *bumiputera* who are incapable of writing intelligent letters in English, I know that the signs and symptoms are already there. If I may say so again, soon it may be too late. (March 9, 1968 — from the book *The Early Years, 1947-1972, a compilation of writings by Dr Mahathir Mohamad.*)

Pas rival but, true to his personality and unconventional thinking, was soon creating controversies by speaking openly about the poverty of the Malays padi farmers and the manipulation of the rice trade by middlemen, the majority of whom were Chinese.

Almost overnight, he raised the ire of the Chinese, who were not used to being questioned about their monopoly of the economy.

But while the Chinese were suspicious of him for questioning their business practices, the Malays were being told by Pas that Dr Mahathir was not very Muslim because he did not speak Arabic, did not quote liberally from the Quran and seldom wore a *songkok*.

And when his Umno supporters pleaded with him to wear a *songkok* during the 1969 general election campaign, he told them that his *iman* (faith in God) was in his heart, not his *songkok*.

It was a landmark election and perhaps the most 'free' in the history of the country, with campaigning lasting almost three months. But it was also the most racially charged.

The DAP — the offshoot of the Singapore's People's Action Party — was demanding for a 'Malaysian Malaysia' while the Malay-dominated Pas was labelling Umno supporters *kafir* (infidels) and questioning the citizenship rights of the non-Malays.

At the heart of it was the implementation of the National Language Policy in 1967 that made Malay the national language of the country and medium of instruction in schools. It culminated in the near defeat of the Alliance and the race riots of May 13.

Dr Mahathir was one of the losers. He was defeated by the Pas candidate, the late Yusof Rawa. Yusof would go on to become Pas President.

Dr Mahathir's views on Malay poverty and domination of the economy by the Chinese angered Tunku. Their disagreement came to a head when Dr Mahathir wrote the book *The Malay Dilemma*, culminating in his expulsion from Umno in September of that year.

While remaining committed to Umno, Dr Mahathir seldom missed opportunities to make his views and feelings known.

A MAN OF THOUGHTS AND ACTION

AKJ: Which are you – a thinker or tinker?

Dr Mahathir: I would say both. I think just thinking about something and not implementing it does no good. I remember when I was still in school, I was asking 'why don't you do this, why don't you do that' of the elders. Then I realised that I was asking why other people were not doing things, not why I wasn't doing them. So I set about doing things.

When the British proposed the establishment of the Malayan Union, we started to do things. For example, we made posters and pasted them all over town at night. We could not afford to print the posters and we had to hide the fact that we were making them. One of the boys in our group got the idea of using potatoes as printing blocks. We engraved words and symbols on them and used Chinese ink to print the posters in large quantity. The police went to all the printing shops in Alor Star to find out who had been printing those posters. It wasn't just a question of saying 'I want to put up posters'; we had to think of how to produce them.

That is why when I became Prime Minister, the first thing I did was to explain how things were to be done. For example, in administration I introduced the checklist, work manual and disk file to make sure that everybody knew what he had to do and how to go about doing it. Lots of people make decisions, then pass them on to their subordinates, assuming that they know how to implement them. That is not the way. You have to tell your subordinate how to do it because it is you who thought of the idea. We now have in the government, work flow charts, manuals of procedures and desk files. Everybody knows his or her task, and in that way the work gets done.

Another innovation was the post-Cabinet briefing. Previously the Cabinet met, made decisions, recorded them and then passed them on to the officers. The officers were not briefed and they often could not understand how and why these decisions were made. They had their own ideas about making and implementing these decisions. In reality, we (Cabinet members) had already discussed and rejected those ideas.

So I introduced the post-Cabinet briefings to explain to the officers what decisions were made, why we made them and how they should be implemented. As a result, things got done. Previously, when decisions were made, they didn't even keep track to see whether they were carried out or not. – **From the book *The Wings of an Eagle***

Shut out of the mainstream media, he took to participating in seminars and conferences, including those organised by the opposition parties.

Asked soon after he was made Deputy Prime Minister in 1976 (after he was readmitted to Umno) why he participated in these conferences, he replied that as a politician he had to make his voice heard.

'When you are on the other side of the fence, you have to shout to be heard,' he said.

Shouting – that includes making strong statements and sharp criticisms – is, in a way, Dr Mahathir's way of hiding his true character. He is, in person, very soft and even shy.

People who were exposed to him via his speeches and writings were surprised to find him soft-spoken and extremely courteous when they met him in person.

His strength is his knowledge. He is a voracious reader and a good listener. He is all ears when it comes to things that excite him.

And literally nothing escapes his attention – the bane of editors. A misleading headline in his 'favourite' newspapers would invariably lead to a phone call to

the editor.

He is a great believer in headlines and slogans. He often argued that people were attracted to good headlines and slogans.

He is as good a listener as he is a speaker. It was not uncommon for him to spend up to eight hours – breaking only for lunch and noon prayers – listening to members of the Malaysian Business Council (MBC).

But he would also spend hours on his feet speaking to the audience. At the inaugural *Kem Bena Semangat Perdana*, a team-building course held at Port Dickson in 1991, he spent three solid days explaining Vision 2020 to Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, senior civil servants, top businessmen and editors.

He has a fantastic ability to absorb information and has a highly effective way of digesting and regurgitating information. He also keeps a notebook.

The notion that Dr Mahathir cannot stand criticism cannot be further from the truth. What he cannot stand is unsubstantiated arguments and poorly thought-out ideas.

Very few people dare to engage him in

debate, not only because he is so knowledgeable but also because he can be ruthless in his rebuttal.

Yet, Dr Mahathir enjoys a good argument. It was said that the best parliamentary debate he ever had was with Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew when the latter was a member of the Malaysian Parliament (1963-65).

Dr Mahathir is successful with most of his policies and programmes because they are well thought-out and founded on practicality.

This is because he is as much a tinker as he is a thinker. Asked which of the two better describes him, Dr Mahathir said both (*see box story*).

In transforming the country, Dr Mahathir has transformed himself – from firebrand to statesman. But he remains unpretentious and surprisingly down to earth. He will be remembered as the man who gave meaning to the slogan 'Malaysia Boleh'.

As we look forward to the leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, we will always be reminded of the legacy left behind by Dr Mahathir – the things he did his way. **mb**