

Consulting with the Doctor

In the first-ever interview of its kind, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad talks to *Malaysia Tatler* about his primary-school entrepreneurship, his gate-crashing political youth and why he likes calm horses

Sunlight streams through the windows on the 86th floor of Petronas Tower 1. A small crowd fusses with last-minute preparations: backdrops, furniture and recording equipment. When the minute hand strikes the appointed hour, a hush descends over the group, as though they are awaiting an audience.

And indeed they are. Though, shunning any pomp or circumstance, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad emerges from an anteroom exactly at the appointed hour. No entourage or swarm of PAs for this former prime minister, he simply takes the requested place in front of the camera without hesitation and gives the people what they want.

Of course, that has always been his stated goal, but now, out of the prime minister's office and into his comfortable seat as honorary president of the Perdana Leadership Foundation, he should at least have the luxury of a bit more time.

"I'm still very busy," he says, smiling and rubbing his hands together. "People keep on inviting me to give talks. Usually they want to know about Malaysia, the advantages and how we managed to develop it."

Political Awakening

He is, after all, considered the father of modern Malaysia. However he claims not to have had this in mind at all when he first began protesting the Malay Union when still a youth. "When I was school

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Words: Joseph Balan and Sheelah Gullion. Photography: Simon Chin



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boy, I really became conscious about my environment, my position, the position of the Malays in society," he says, massaging his neck. "And when the British proposed to create the Malayan Union, which would mean that Malaysia would be a totally British colony, at that time I became very agitated and I urged my classmates – schoolmates – to do something about it. So we started making posters, anti-Malayan Union posters. That was the beginning.

"And my interest never flagged," he says, tucking his hands behind his knees. "I became very interested and I met a lot of people in politics and became engrossed and involved in their political activities. Of course, at that time of the Malayan Union, people were very agitated. We were protesting, and I became so interested that I actually went to KL from Alor Setar and attended the first Malay Congress in the Sultan Sulaiman Club as an uninvited observer. I just went there, like a gate crasher – in those days they were not very concerned about security."

While this may have been one of the first tastes of leadership for Tun Mahathir, he'd already been following his own instincts for a long time. When he was still a boy attending the government English school in Alor Setar – now known as Sultan Abdul Hamid College – he discovered for himself the basics of capitalism.

The Profit, Mohamad

"My father had just been pensioned off so his salary was reduced from about \$200 to \$90, so then he reduced my pocket allowance from four cents to two cents," he says, starting to grin. "To supplement that, I used to buy balloons [at two cents for three balloons] and sell them [for three cents each] to my classmates."

This was not Tun Mahathir's only brush with early entrepreneurialism. He also sold *chendol* and bananas and, as he told J Victor Morais in *Mahathir: A Profile of Courage*, "I organised *tikam*, or lucky draws, using a soap box and cheap tea cups for prizes."

Tun Mahathir credits his father, Mohamad

bin Iskandar for instilling him with a sense of exacting purpose. A strict disciplinarian, Tun Mahathir's father was an English teacher, who taught Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. "I think [my father] has had a very strong influence on my personality, perhaps because I'm equally strict and, well, I focused more on studies and work and played much less sports," Tun Mahathir says.

Aside from a bit of badminton in the neighbourhood and some rugby – the only game he played in school – he largely shunned physical activities. "I was not much of a sportsman," he states. Still, every boy loves a hero and for the young Mahathir Mohamad, if it could not be the heroes on the sporting field, it would be those from history. And so it was that he nurtured his intellectual inclinations with the heroic tales of history's great leaders, many of whom came to inspire him.

"The storybooks I used to read as a boy – there were stories about great heroes and fighters during World War I; there were these great fighter pilots, adventurers, all these people

who inspired me," he says, leaning forward in his chair. "And later on, when I became involved in politics, I figured out [who were] the leaders who have succeeded, and I must admit among these leaders was the prophet of Islam, Prophet Mohammed, among others were people who changed the things in their country, like Peter the Great of Russia."

The comparison to Russia's Czar Peter I is not unfounded. Peter I is credited with drawing Russia out of medieval times, centralising government, modernising the army and creating a navy.

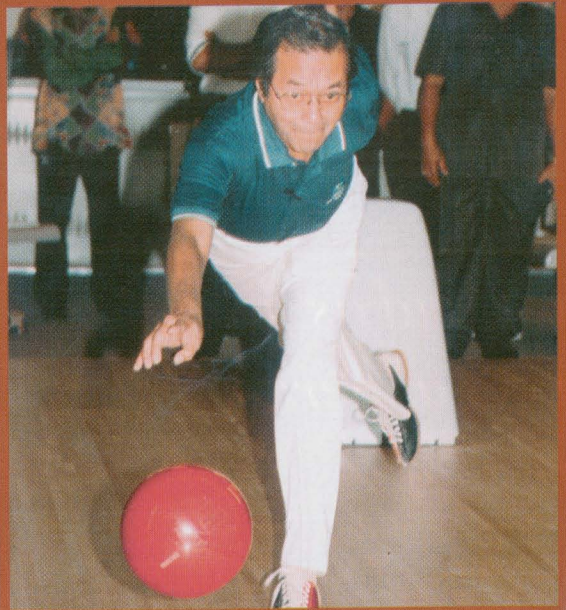
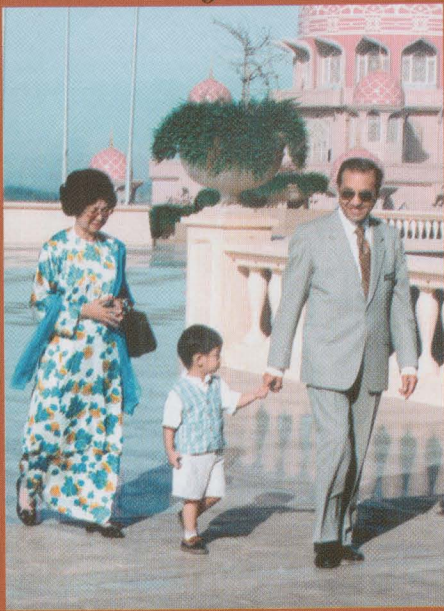
A Shared Passion

After secondary school, Tun Mahathir won a scholarship to study medicine at the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore. It was there that he met a certain young woman medical student who caught his eye. Thinking back on these days, he sits back in his chair and smiles distantly.

"We were in the same batch," he says, referring to his batch of medical students



Personal life



Clockwise from above: Strolling in Putrajaya with grandson and Tun Siti Hasmah; Always sharing and caring; Testing his skills on the bowling lane; A tender moment captured forever; A portrait with the family and grandchildren; Tun cooking *nasi goreng*, his speciality; A perfect team – always sharing views and thoughts with each other



[During university days] we used to go out fairly often but we didn't have much money. Sometimes we'd go together to the cinema



at King Edward College, where he met Siti Hasmah binti Mohd Ali, who is now Tun Dr Siti Hasmah binti Mohd Ali. "In 1947, we went to medical college; there were seven Malays and she was the only girl. So we were close, this group of seven. At the end of the year, we were left with only four [students] and I used to help her with her work. I used to coach her in physics and all that," he says. "So we became closer. We used to go out fairly often but we didn't have much money, so weekends we might go and have some hawker food. Sometimes we'd go together to the cinema."

Even while a student, however, Tun Mahathir stayed politically involved. His socio-political commentary was published in the *Sunday Times* (Singapore) from 1948-50 under the pen name CHE Det, an Anglicisation of a nickname, Che Det. Still, his political persona was in its earliest stages of forming, and he was still focused on achieving what, for him, would be his "most valuable" award, his medical degree.

Both Tun Mahathir and Tun Siti Hasmah

passed their medical exams and became physicians in 1953; the couple married in 1957 and eventually had 7 children: 4 sons and 3 daughters.

Tun Mahathir pursued politics and his medical practice in parallel. Though he'd been a member of UMNO since 1946, when his outspokenness and popularity made him an obvious candidate for the 1959 election, his refusal to stand sent a strong message. In 1964, he became an elected member of parliament.

In only 10 years, he became minister of education; two years on he was deputy prime minister after Tun Abdul Razak's death, and then two years more saw him become deputy president of UMNO. Finally in 1981 he was president of UMNO and Prime Minister of Malaysia. By this time, his reputation as an outspoken – and arguably intimidating – individual was secure: "Some people – I can't understand it, but – they become very nervous [around me]," says Tun Mahathir. "They seem to think that I'm fierce. I think it's because there's this general feeling of awe

when meeting a prime minister. I think it is that, rather than my personality."

Reflections

But then again, it has never been in Tun Mahathir's character to navel-gaze. He's more concerned with reflecting on achievements made and plans yet to come, but on this unhurried day, he is willing to look back at whether he's achieved what he set out to.

"Not everything [I wanted to achieve I did] because there are a lot of things to be done," says Tun Mahathir, nodding. "But up to the time I retired, I think I have done quite a lot and it was, to me, quite satisfying."

What's surprising after all this time is that he says he never really pictured himself in politics: "It's not something that I entertained when I was a child – to become prime minister. It was unthinkable because we [Malaysia] were not even independent and the idea of an independent Malaysia, with its own government was something I could not imagine."

But even after independence, he couldn't see his own future. "Not until I became the

Timeline

- 1925** born in Alor Setar, Kedah
- 1945** receives his Senior Cambridge
- 1947** enters King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore
- 1948-50** works as stringer with *Sunday Times*
- 1953** receives medical degree that confers the title "Doctor"
- 1954-57** serves as medical officer in Alor Setar, Langkawi and Perlis
- 1957** marries Tun Siti Hasmah
- 1957** sets up medical practice, Maha Clinic, in Alor Setar
- 1957** birth of first child, Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir
- 1958** Mirzan Mahathir born
- 1959** Melinda Mahathir born
- 1961** Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir born
- 1964** Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir born
- 1964** enters the Malaysia Parliament as a UMNO member
- 1968** chairman, First Higher Education Council
- 1946-78** Member of Parliament for Kota Star Selatan, Kedah
- 1970** publishes *The Malay Dilemma*
- 1973** appointed to Senate
- 1974-2004** Member of Parliament for Kubang Pasu, Kedah
- 1975** becomes Minister of Education
- 1976** Deputy Prime Minister, March 5
- 1981** Prime Minister, July 16
- 1984** Mazhar Mahathir born
- 1984** Maizura Mahathir born
- 1989** multiple bypass surgery
- 1988-97** Malaysia experiences impressive growth of over 10%, with living standards increasing 20-fold
- 1996** writes a poem entitled *Perjuangan yang belum selesai* (An unfinished Struggle) and recites it at the Fourth Utusan Poetry Night
- 1998** opening of Kuala Lumpur International Airport in June
- 1998** Petronas Twin Towers opens August 17
- 1998** Malaysia pegs the ringgit to the US dollar in September
- 1999** admitted to National Heart Institute (IJN) to rest and undergo full treatment for a lung infection suffered after returning from performing the Haj
- 1999** Sepang Formula-1 racetrack opens March 9
- 2002** announces resignation but is persuaded to stay on 18 more months
- 2003** steps down from prime ministerial post on October 31
- 2003** advisor, Petroliaam Nasional Berhad (Petronas)
- 2004** advisor, Proton and chairman for Antartica Solo Expedition
- 2005** honorary president, Perdana Leadership Foundation, Putrajaya



Being able to do what you set out to do could be considered as success

deputy," he says. "You see, before that, I never imagined I would ever become the prime minister. Although I did think becoming a minister was possible."

Instead, he says that if politics hadn't been his focus, he would have continued his medical practice. He was the first Malay doctor in the state of Kedah and the first with his own medical practice. But he was also the first person in that state to own a big American car, a Pontiac. "I have two, in fact," he adds with a Cheshire-cat grin.

In the Saddle

Imagining Tun Mahathir and Tun Siti Hasmah racing around Alor Setar in a Pontiac is not so difficult, really, especially for such a man as Tun Mahathir, who has always had his sights set higher and further than his contemporaries. But now that he is no longer the decision-maker, his habits are still the same. When not lecturing or providing incisive opinions, he

continues to shun the television and enjoys spending time with his nose in a book reading about adventure.

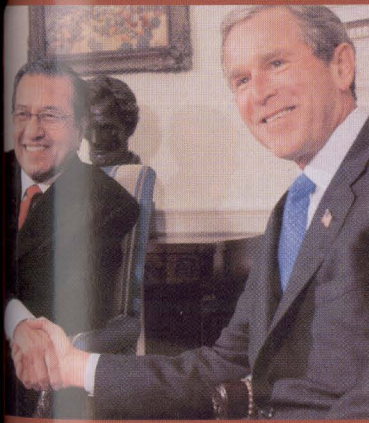
"I read a lot of novels," he says. "Stories written by well-known authors like Wilbur Smith and Ken Follett. They are usually adventures, sometimes historical. Well, it's a way of avoiding having to read heavy books."

"Other than that, there's nothing much. But I do ride horses. I took that up when I was 60 years old. And I have a lot of horses – more than 20. The ones I ride are specially chosen because they are calm. They are not likely to get excited or to suddenly gallop away."

And with the meeting nearly over, there is only one last chance to ask Tun Mahathir two burning questions. The first: what is his definition of success? "Being able to do what you set out to do could, I think, be considered as success."

The second: boxers or briefs – or sarong? A sheepish look of surprise crosses his face briefly before he confesses: "Sarong." □

Political career



Clockwise from right: Tun showing off the 300,000th Proton car; Tun on his appointment as UMNO president; Tun sharing stage with Nelson Mandela; Standing proud observing the construction of Malaysia's biggest landmark; Tun showing the Sultan of Brunei a view of Putrajaya; With Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's 2nd prime minister; Visiting US President George W Bush

