

**T**un Dr Mahathir Mohamad appears larger than life on television or in the newspapers. In person, however, he is much smaller and almost frail-looking. But his imposing presence still shines forth despite the calm, gentle and soft-spoken demeanour. The steely glint in his eyes and determined set of his jaw — the sheer assurance he carries — is enough to make the bravest cower.

At the time of this meeting, it was exactly one year and a day after he left office as Prime Minister of Malaysia. Since then, he has given one interview to an English tabloid daily, and near half a dozen more after our tête-à-tête. It would, however, be uncharacteristic of the man to do otherwise. He promised, shortly after his retirement, that he would “not get involved in politics” and he hasn’t, but this makes him no less sought-after as a media story.

#### COUNSEL GENERAL

Tun Dr Mahathir is now settled in his role as the Adviser to Malaysia’s biggest company, Petronas (Petroliam Nasional Berhad). The oil and gas conglomerate has placed him in an office occupying an entire floor that can comfortably house a small advertising agency, yet he amiably shrugs off any grandeur to his “very general” role there.

“I only meet with the President/CEO if I have anything. Many people want to have dealings with Petronas and they seem to think they can go through me. I don’t have any authority except to hand over their appeals. It is up to Petronas to consider.”

He continues: “I have been with Petronas since my time as Prime Minister, so I know what they are doing. Sometimes there are opportunities abroad and people come to me and I would tell Petronas to investigate.”

# MOUNTAIN

In the heady and plush confines of the 86<sup>th</sup> floor office in the Petronas Twin Towers, *The Peak* came head to head with Malaysia’s most vociferous statesman, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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# MAHATHIR



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Tun Dr Mahathir is also the Adviser to Proton, Malaysia's first automobile manufacturer, his brainchild some two decades back. "I try to speak to them about my ideas, to help them to work out their strategies for the future," he adds.

So what precious nuggets of counsel does he impart to the two corporate giants?

"Petronas had long been advised to go abroad as our production of oil is quite low (620,000 barrels per day) and may run out soon as consumption increases, so they must find reserves abroad. They have done that and are now operating in 36 countries." He also points out other opportunities like trade, and stresses on considering the interests of the people of the countries where the business operates. Basically, to provide training and medical facilities and to get involved as good corporate citizens.

With regards to Proton, he wants the brand to expand because the local market is not large enough. "We must learn how to market abroad," he says. The use of the pronoun 'we' does not go unnoticed. It's small proof of his distinctive leadership style, immersing himself intensely until the desired result is achieved.

Speaking of counsel, Tun Dr Mahathir reprises the role on a grander scale in an international setting. He has been invited to speak at many international forums, a fact he laments for the sole reason that they take up so much of his time.

"(My family members) think I'm spending too much time with these speaking engagements," he says with a smile. "They would like me to spend more time with them. I try, but not as much as I'd hoped." Gesturing to the pile of papers in front of him, he avers: "I'm very, very busy. At the beginning of *puasa* (fasting month) I went to Italy and Germany. Tomorrow I'm leaving for Croatia. After returning from Croatia, I'll go to China and Japan. In fact, I have been going abroad more often than when I was Prime Minister."

When asked if he enjoys these trips, Tun Dr Mahathir laughingly says, "Oh no! You can't enjoy a trip like this. When I went to Turkey, I flew for 10 hours to deliver a half-an-hour speech, and then flew back. It's going to be the same with Croatia. I don't go sightseeing."

### **THE TRUTH ABOUT ISLAM**

The subject matters Tun Dr Mahathir speaks about are far from trivial. He has been asked to comment on leadership, on how Malaysia became an industrialised nation from its beginnings as an agriculture-based society, and on how Malaysia manages Islam as a multi-racial and multi-ethnic country.

In fact, he is very vocal about the subject of Islam and we spent a good deal of time exploring the topic. "I think the world doesn't understand Islam," says Tun Dr Mahathir seriously. "(This problem) is not confined to the non-Muslims as even Muslims do not seem to understand it. I have studied Islam, especially the Quran, many times in Malay and English and find that the teachings are quite different from the practice of the Muslims."

In true Mahathir style, he continues unabashedly: "Where Muslims are urged to be brothers, they fight each other. Where they are urged to acquire knowledge, they refuse to do so. Where they are urged to be strong enough to defend the Muslim *ummah*, they make no attempt to do that. So what is Islam?"

According to him, the difference in the teaching and the practice is in the varied interpretations. "Interpreters are human beings, they are not prophets. You have to go back to the teachings of the Prophet. Non-Muslims in this country are very tolerant, they understand."

Putting a legal spin on this subject, I pose the question of whether the incorporation of religion or Syariah law into the governance of a country would be detrimental to civil liberties, given that other groups are not subject to other religious courts. Tun Dr Mahathir's take on this is that Islam does not curb people's civil liberties. "What we did was to look at the civil laws that we inherited, to see that they are compatible with Islamic principles. We are not really implementing Islamic laws on non-Muslims.

"The laws we have are compatible with Islam, so there is really equal treatment for Muslims and non-Muslims. But Muslims have to submit to the Syariah, and this personal law (family law) should be confined to them only," he explains.



Expounding on the teachings of Islam, Tun Dr Mahathir emphasises that the religion stresses on justice. "Whenever you judge, judge with justice. That is repeated in the Quran many, many times. So if your judgement results in an injustice, then it is not Islamic. All the laws that we have in this country are just laws."

Based on this tenet, Tun Dr Mahathir's ideal of a model government is one that is able to do things for the country and for the people. "To be able to do things, you must be sanctioned and strong. A government that is shaky — maybe with a one-seat majority — will not be able to focus on the development of a country. On the other hand, a strong government must also restrain itself and not abuse the power.

"We have the ISA (Internal Security Act), which enables the government to detain people without trial, but that has to be used very sparingly," Tun Dr Mahathir explains, using Malaysia as an example. "In fact, when I became Prime Minister, the first thing I did was to release 200-300 detainees who had not really been a security threat to the country. Unfortunately, I also had to detain people who tried to disturb the peace. So, the ISA is useful, but it must be used very sparingly," he reiterates.

And a strong political base, according to Tun Dr Mahathir, is crucial so that the powers-that-be can focus on economic development "without sniping by the opposition".

"In Malaysia, the government has always gained very strong support from the people and because of that, we have been able to attain economic development," he says.

## GOVERNMENTAL LESSONS

Tun Dr Mahathir is a proponent of the adage that one must practice what one preaches, a principle that is the rudimentary step towards a leader's credibility.

He says evenly: "If you ask people to wear a name tag, you must also wear a name tag. If you ask people to dress in a different way, you must do so yourself. And, of course, if you tell people not to be corrupt, you must not be

corrupt. That is why leadership by example is very important."

Extending this piece of advice to all and sundry, he softens and says, "I think everybody should consider themselves a leader, at least within his or her own circle. You may be a leader in your own family, or in your extended family. You may be a leader in your own office. Even at the lowest level, you must show a good example."

Twenty-two years in the highest political executive office, however, is not so cut-and-dry. The major lessons he has gleaned from his time are illuminating and not quite what is expected.

"In politics, there are no permanent friends or enemies. Even if you help people, you must never expect that they will be grateful to you. They might stab you in the back; they might try and do something that will undermine you. This I learned from my experience," he shares.

"I try to work with everybody and am quite tolerant. I never change my staff, but expect the best (from them). If I change them, I will have to start all over again. But in politics, I have no choice. I have to accept the people chosen by the party or the people. So this is a revelation for me. We are taught to be grateful, but there is no such thing as gratitude."

Revealing himself a little more, he adds that his time in politics has taught him much. "In order to be successful, you have to be consistent and persistent until you achieve (what you set out to do) and continue making corrections."

This is consistent with his reply, much later, when I asked him when he is at his happiest. "I am always happy when I see something that I want to do taking off. That is why I spend a lot of time visiting construction sites of any of the government or private sector projects which contribute to the development of the country. I spend a lot of time driving around in a tall, four-wheel drive so that I can see what is happening around me. These things make me happy so I don't feel tired at all. I can work because the results are there. That's what drives me and that's what makes me happy." ▲

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was born on December 20, 1925 in Alor Star. He did his early and secondary education in his home town and in 1947, gained admission into King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore. Upon graduation, he joined the Malaysian government as a medical officer, leaving in 1957 to set up his own practice.

Politically active, he was a member of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) since its inception in 1946 and was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1964. In 1973, he was appointed as a Senator and relinquished it a year later to run in the General Elections, where he was later appointed as Minister of Education.

In 1975, Tun Dr Mahathir was elected as one of the three Vice-Presidents of UMNO, and in 1976 was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in addition to his education portfolio. On July 16, 1981, he became the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia.