

# Dr M still speaking his mind

The Star - 12/10/2008

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IT TOOK a few seconds for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to realise that we had come through the door of his office at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya.

He had been absorbed in the newspaper spread out on his desk, his chin resting lightly on one hand.

He was reading the business pages of *The Star* or more specifically a report on Temasek, the Singapore government investment arm, and also something on Changi airport.

The former Premier may have retired but he still keeps a hawk's eye on the southern competition.

Dr Mahathir has not had a lovey-dovey relationship with *The Star* either, especially after the paper was shut down following Operation Lalang. It was well known that he read the paper rather sparingly during his years in power but time is a great healer and he admitted, albeit rather grudgingly, "I read *The Star* more these days."

The Putrajaya office is one his three workplaces. He also spends time at his ultra-modern Petronas office and on Fridays, he is usually at the Al-Bukhary Foundation office because it is near the National Mosque where he goes for Friday prayers.

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TUN DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Dr Mahathir cut a striking figure in his long-sleeved bush suit and sporty G-Shock watch and it is hard to believe he is 83.

He has shed more weight since his heart surgery last year and is said to tip the scales at a mere 59kg. But he is definitely no lightweight and his voice continues to resonate.

His blog ([www.chedet.com](http://www.chedet.com)) has been a stunning success. He began without any fanfare in May and today, barely six months down the road, it boasts close to nine million visitors. You can tell he is thrilled with his blogging role. Hundreds of people comment on his postings, many addressing him as, "Dearest Tun" or "Tun yang dikasihi."

It has been said that Dr Mahathir's say-it-like-it-is style meant that you either loved him or disliked him. There was no middle path when it came to him.

But there has been a mellowing of feelings towards him, even a sort of nostalgia about his era, with people dwelling on the good and glossing over the bad and the ugly of his administration.

This was amply clear in the surge of people at his Raya open house this year. Notorious for his punctuality, he was standing at the receiving line at 10am on the dot. But when the line showed no sign of thinning by afternoon, he and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali continued greeting guests seated on armchairs.

This was not a crowd there for the food. They really wanted to see him, kiss his hand, tell him they missed him, warts and all. They also had a lot to say about his successor. Dr Mahathir makes no apologies for being a "thorn in the side" of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He had tried everything he could think of to push his handpicked successor out but it took the devastating general election results for the process of leadership

There has been a mellowing of feeling towards Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the years, but the man himself has not let up on issues and people he feels strongly about.



Still on the ball: Dr Mahathir can be charming, intimidating and awesome, all at the same time.

change to begin.

In the end, the internal party process predominated; Abdullah took the gentleman's path and has decided not to defend his Umno presidency.

During the interview which took place several hours before Abdullah announced his decision, Dr Mahathir had been sceptical that his successor would really go. His reaction later in the day was typically Mahathir - he said he did not mind being proven wrong.

And it is clear he will continue to have his say as a citizen - and he is no ordinary citizen.

But it has not been all politics for him since he retired. He has been able to do things he had never done before, like driving along the North-South Expressway for the first time in his life.

Yes, the man behind the mega project has never driven or been driven on it because he always flew when he was the Prime Minister.

But last year, after attending the funeral of his sister in Kedah, he took the wheel and made his maiden highway trip from Alor Star to Kuala Lumpur. It was a world away from when, as a young MP, he used to drive back and forth between the two towns along the narrow and winding trunk road.

Still, it is nothing compared to the super political highway that he has travelled.

Below are excerpts from the interview:

**Q. Who will be Prime Minister after the next general election, Datuk Seri Najib or Datuk Seri Anwar?**

**A.** It would be disastrous for this country if this man (Anwar) becomes PM because he has no principles. His greatest ambition is to

become PM and he is willing to push to the background all his ideals. But you will find if Abdullah is not there, many of those who voted for the opposition will come back. Najib has lost some credibility over the (Umno leadership) transition issue but if he takes over and has a programme to win back those who left for opposition, there is a chance he will remain the PM.

We cannot give too much power to the PM and president of Umno because he can abuse it. I have been saying he should have a panel of advisers, one each for the PM and Umno president to ensure he doesn't go off on a tangent. That way it would be difficult for the Prime Minister to favour his family. The panel should not be appointed by him, maybe Mubarak (the association of former Barisan Nasional MPs and assemblymen), can play a role. If asked, I would be willing to serve for free.

**Q. You will still be a voice of check and balance even after Datuk Seri Najib takes over?**

**A.** I will criticise as a citizen, I have a right to expect my country to be well governed. I must see that this country is well governed. If I don't, then I would be abdicating my duty as a citizen. I may be wrong in my criticism, I leave that for others to evaluate. I always tell people you must be proud of your country and you can only be proud of your country if it is successful. So you have to work to make it successful.

**Q. Can Barisan recover the states lost to Pakatan Rakyat?**

**A.** It's very difficult but possible where the Opposition won marginally like Perak and Selangor. Kedah and Penang will be difficult.

Kelantan, of course, is no go. When you destroy something, it takes time to rebuild especially if they provide good governance, don't make too many mistakes and are non-racist. In Kedah, this man (Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Azizan Abdul Razak from PAS) has not tried to make a Kelantan in Kedah. He has been very careful, quite smart and he wants to please people.

**Q. What did you make of the hysteria over Sept 16?**

**A.** I've been saying it's not going to happen. It's easier for the Opposition to join the government than the other way around. Before Sept 16, I wrote to BN MPs in Sabah and Sarawak. I said if you want to be effective, if you feel unhappy about your situation, you should form your own grouping and make your own demands. At any time if you withdraw, the government will fall and it is possible even for you to remove the PM. One or two people wrote back, the rest just said, thank you, or did not reply.

**Q. The Malays have trouble adjusting to a new political landscape and their unhappiness is being expressed in a racial manner.**

**A.** Political parties and groups like the Bar Council feel the government is weak and they have been raising sensitive issues like the NEP and the judiciary which we feel should not be publicly discussed. The Malays feel these groups are racist because the attacks are mainly directed at Malays. The Malay response is to attack back on the basis of race. So both sides are playing racial issues, not just the Malays.

**Q. Your blog is a runaway success.**

**A.** People want information but they have lost regard for the pro-government media. They are told inflation is 7% but when they have to pay 30% more for oil, that is important, not your 7%. They are also told foreign investment is coming in but where is it? Have you seen anything happening in the Corridors? The Arabs came, they saw, they said they would invest, they went off and they haven't come back. The Arabs can only invest in buildings not land. Where are the jobs?

**Q. When will you rejoin Umno?**

**A.** I said I would not rejoin as long as Abdullah is the PM. But it is not a matter of rejoining. People followed me out, whole branches closed down even if it was not reported. I can't just leave them behind. I have to work to bring them in. Also, my membership may be vetoed.

**Q. It is a crowded race for the Umno deputy presidency.**

**A.** They want to split the vote so that Muhyiddin will lose. But it may also work in favour of Muhyiddin because the votes of those opposing him will be split so he will probably win.

**Q. Will you let bygones be bygones with Abdullah?**

**A.** If he steps down. The damage done has been terrible. I used to boast to people from other countries that, yes, we have different races. We are not hugging each other but we get along. But now people are not happy, they blame the Malays, the NEP.

**Q. The way you went for Pak Lah, was it just the crooked bridge or more than that?**

**A.** Until the crooked bridge I didn't become vocal but I was unhappy with what I saw. A few days after I stepped down, after promising he would continue with the double tracking and electrification north-south project, he cancelled it. He also returned US\$98 million to the Arab investor for the Bakun Dam project, citing technicalities.

I had worked very hard to bring them from Dubai. The idea is if they take an interest in the hydroelectric project, they would also set up an aluminium smelter which is a big consumer of electricity. So we would have a ready consumer there. There was no written thing but he had given an undertaking to continue with the projects.

So when it came to the bridge, I was really sore. It was the straw that broke the camel's back or rather Mahathir's back.