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SMA NEWS

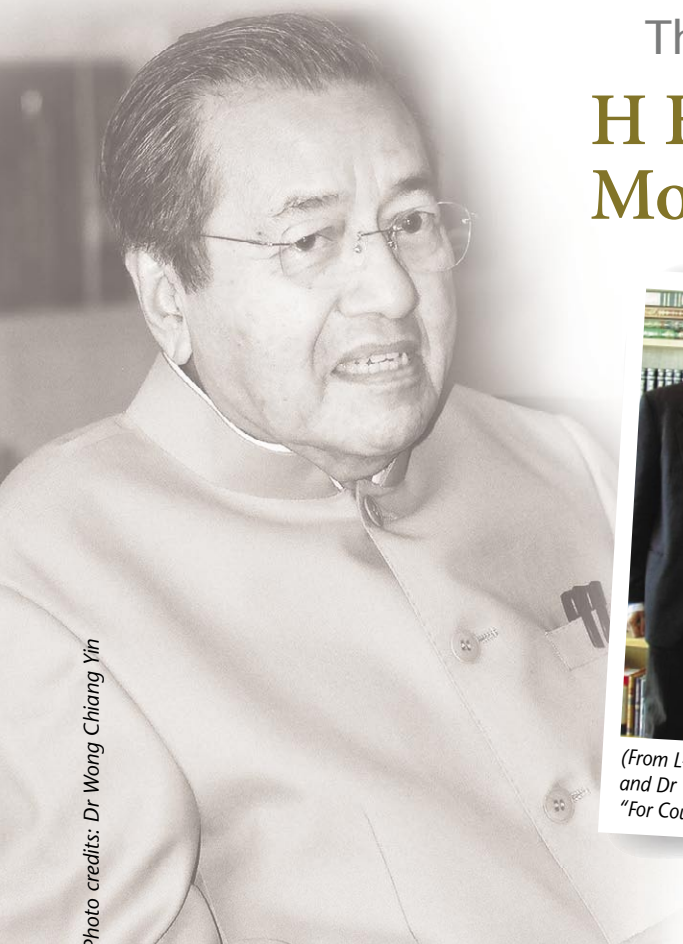


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The SMA News interviews H E Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad



(From L-R) Dr Toh Han Chong, H E Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Dr Wong Chiang Yin. The Chinese calligraphy reads: "For Country, For People".

The SMA News is greatly honoured to be granted the privilege of interviewing H E Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The team of Editor Dr Toh Han Chong, 1st Vice President Dr Wong Chiang Yin, and Editorial Manager Krysania Tan, met the former Prime Minister of Malaysia on 21 September 2005 at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Precinct 8 of Putrajaya, Malaysia's administrative city. In this exclusive issue of the SMA News, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad reflects on healthcare costs, changing mindsets and globalisation, choosing Medicine over Law, and what he really thinks of Frank Sinatra's My Way.

THC : Tun Dr Mahathir, thank you for granting us this interview. The first question is one of

legacy. 1981 was a very different time from 2005, and in the 22 years that you were the Prime Minister of Malaysia, you have certainly engineered Malaysia's growth and economy. How do you see the way forward for Malaysia in the next 22 years?

Dr M : I think the foundation was already built by the first three Prime Ministers, and then strengthened. So the way forward should not be difficult, because it is a question of continuing, and maybe improving on the method of implementing the development of the country.

THC : India, the world's largest democracy, and China, with its tremendous potential, are rising globally. Malaysia and Singapore face new



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Published by the Singapore Medical Association, Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre, 2 College Road, Singapore 169850.
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URL: <http://www.sma.org.sg>

challenges, and technology today is very different from 1981. How will Malaysia position itself apart from manufacturing- and export-based economic growth? What is the new world order going to be like for Malaysia?

Dr M : Well, we take into consideration the growth and development of China and India. These are two very big countries. Obviously, if they prosper, they become very good markets, and Malaysia will have to find out how it can supply the needs of these two.

THC : As you have mentioned in your biographical sketch, the British felt that if you had done Law, you might potentially be more of a threat, being the political upstart that you were. If you had to wind back the clock again and become a young man of 17, and if the British had offered you a Law scholarship, would you have done Law instead of Medicine?

Dr M : Yes, I think I would. At that time, I had no idea what Medicine was like, so I would have chosen Law which was my first choice.

THC : Why would Law have been a first inclination for you?

Dr M : Well, in school, I had been participating in debates. I was actually the Head of the Literary, Drama and Debating Society. I find debates very stimulating.

THC : You have said that you were already a politician even as you entered medical school. We do know that, as a medical student, you wrote articles about the Malay underclass and Malay culture for *The Sunday Times* in Singapore. Can you tell us a bit about that student journalistic experience? Did they pay you well?

Dr M : I think well enough. It was not a very big sum of money. They paid \$20 to \$30 for each article. But to me, that was quite a lot of money in those days, considering that I received an allowance of about \$15 from the government as part of my scholarship.

THC : You have been a champion for the underdogs and often fought for the underprivileged. How did it all begin: your fight against injustice, whether it be for the Malay rural people, afflicted Muslim societies such as the Bosnians and Palestinians, beleaguered ASEAN or Malaysia?

Dr M : I would think that it is something quite natural. I mean, most people have sympathy for the underdog. You do not side with the bully, for example. Generally, people are inclined to support the weak against the strong. So it is nothing unusual for me.

THC : Can you share with us some of your happy memories of being in medical school, whether it is going out on a motorcycle, or attending classes, or being ragged by Dr Chee Phui Hung?

Dr M : I made a lot of friends in Singapore among the medical students, and I think that is something I will always remember. Of course, there, I found the person who I was going to marry. So, that is very important to me. And our, well, I do not know whether you can call it courtship, but our friendship developed and we enjoyed each other's company.

THC : Were there parts of Singapore that you liked to go and eat out at during your courtship days?

Dr M : We went to Marine Parade and we would get some *sotong*, you know, squid, and things like that. At that time, there was no reclaimed land. It was just the seaside.

THC : At that time, that would still be Katong and the East Coast.

Dr M : Yes, that is right.

THC : When you wrote *The Malay Dilemma*, those were difficult times in Malaysia, with the race riots of 1969 just passed. When you were expelled from UMNO for being considered an extremist, did you ever feel that it was possible that your political career would be put on hold, and you would end up returning to being a doctor in Alor Star again? That is, at the time before Tun Abdul Razak came into power.

Dr M : I did go back to practising Medicine, because as a Member of Parliament, you can practise Medicine, and you can have your own source of income. When I was expelled, I just continued as a doctor.

THC : The tapestry of Malaysian politics is certainly very dynamic and colourful. Malaysia has undergone an economic miracle since its agricultural days. I think the SMA readership would also like to hear your views on healthcare costs, because that is a major challenge for any modern society.

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Dr M : In the first place, almost as soon as Independence was achieved, our government focused on rural healthcare. So they started midwives' clinics, travelling dispensaries, and things like that. And as the number of doctors increased, they posted many to the rural areas. The cost, of course, will mount, because we inherited the British system of free medical care for the whole country. In those days, the cost of medicines was about one cent only, or something like that. Of course, for one cent, you bring your own bottle. Now antibiotics can cost \$5 or \$10 per capsule. It became a big burden on the government.

THC : I think there were critics who felt that privatisation of the public health services in the vein of Thatcherism kept some of the middle class and lower-middle class from receiving optimal healthcare. What are your reflections on that?

Dr M : Now, we have a lot of private clinics and private doctors practising. Obviously, they cater to the people who can pay. Those who cannot pay will go to the public hospitals. But for some things, you still have to go to the public hospitals, because sometimes, for surgery for example, you go to the hospitals. Private surgical clinics are also there, but many will go to the public hospitals.

THC : Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is visiting California to look at building up Malaysia's Biotech industry. As you know, Singapore is moving into this area of knowledge-based economy. Looking at China's and India's sheer number of trained people in the Sciences, in R&D, and in Information Technology, how can countries like Malaysia and Singapore position themselves to compete in Biotechnology and the Life Sciences?

Dr M : We have the resources. Biotech is really investigating flora and fauna, and that is plentiful here in Malaysia. Some of the plants which grow in this wet rainforest are not found anywhere else. It is possible they will be a source of medicine or other chemicals.

THC : When pilgrim forefathers landed in the United States, they brought along a Protestant Calvinist theology, whereby the creation of wealth, saving of money and value of thrift,

are all for God. Even the fact that banks can lend at an interest rate is initiated by Calvinist theology. Is there an Islamic scholarship that teaches and legitimises wealth creation and modernisation in the same way that the early Christian forefathers have pushed America in the same direction?

Dr M : Well, absolutely. When Islam came to the ignorant Arabs, they accepted Islam along with the value system. And subsequently, they were able to build a great civilisation and produce great scholars in the Sciences, Mathematics, and everything else. So there is nothing in Islam to hinder the development of the community.

THC : Different Muslim countries have had different rates of progress and Malaysia has taken the lead in that sense compared to some of the Arab nations. I would imagine that Malaysia, after 22 years of your time as Prime Minister, is really the face of modern Islam, which is to say that it is a model state for other Muslim countries to follow.

Dr M : We think of ourselves as Muslim fundamentalists. In other words, we follow the fundamental teachings of Islam. What has happened, of course, over 1400 years, there have been interpretations and re-interpretations. As usual, it produces a lot of different understandings. Some of the understandings and beliefs were interpreted to the Muslims that they would not be able to cope with modernisation. You see, even in Christianity, you have people like the Amish. In America, they are very traditionalist, and they are seen to be unable to modernise. But that is all due to interpretations, whether it be a Christian religion, or Muslim religion, or other religions. It is the interpretation that matters.

THC : In Malaysia, you have many women in leadership positions in government and the private sector. But perhaps in the Middle East, that is less of the situation. Are they more traditional in their views of the role of the woman in Muslim society?

Dr M : Again, that is due to the interpretation. They tend to really stick to the old perception, even the pre-Islamic perception of the role of women. Before Islam of course, women were regarded as cattle, and they were just the property of the men who do what they like. Some of that may have come through even after they became Muslims.

THC : As a young boy, I used to watch the Malaysia Cup where the likes of Mohktar

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Dahari, Santokh Singh and Soh Chin Aun from Malaysia, played against Quah Kim Song, Mohamad Noh and Dollah Kassim from Singapore. These were two multi-racial countries playing in friendly competition. How do you think Malaysia, moving forward, can continue to build upon a multi-racial society? Surely, every race has its strengths and values in contributing to the nation?

Dr M : I think the Malaysian model is one that a lot of people are interested in. We are in fact more multi-racial than Singapore because there is actually no really dominant race here. Even the Malays, if you add up Sarawak and Sabah natives, may make up the majority, but their majority is very, very small. So each race has a bigger contribution to make to the society. It is much more evenly balanced.

THC : But 60% Malays is a majority in Malaysia.

Dr M : Yes, although 60% is inclusive of the Sarawak and Sabah natives.

THC : The young Malay intelligentsia may be more receptive to improving racial integration. I guess it would start in the schools with the young, because the next generation of Malaysian leadership are in the schools today. Would it be possible to move towards a more integrated school system, rather than many of the Chinese going to the Chinese schools or private schools, and many of the Indians and Malays going to their own schools? It is obviously difficult for each race to understand one another in a situation like that.

Dr M : Well, if we can, of course we would like them all to go to one national school. We are tolerant; we allow people to study in their own language in their own school. But when they leave school, they work together in the same companies and factories, so they do get to know each other. There have been no racial clashes other than 1969.

THC : In *The Malay Dilemma*, you said that you spent six years in Singapore, and felt that Singaporeans and Malaysians would not be compatible in a union. But many of your best friends are in Singapore, like Dr James Murugasu and Dr George Khoo. What led you to those observations then as a young man? Obviously, your Singaporean friends and you were very compatible.

Dr M : Actually, James and George are Malaysians. They are not Singaporeans – they happened to settle down in Singapore. But even with Singaporeans, I have no problems. That is different, that is a personal relationship, you see. But when you come to politics, there will be differences, and we have to accept the differences.



THC : Who are the politicians and statesmen that you have admired and respected, past or present?

Dr M : Well, people like South African leaders Nelson Mandela and FW De Klerk, and former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev. These are people who strategised their activities. They did not reveal their intention to do away with the existing system until they reached the top, when they were in a position of power. Gorbachev introduced *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, and De Klerk decided that they should tear down Apartheid. When he was a junior in the party, he would have been blocked from ever reaching the top. So these are people who are really smart.

THC : Gorbachev may have moved too quickly in those days to open up to Western-style economic reforms, contributing to the way Russia has turned out today.

Dr M : The Russians tried to do too much. They tried to change both the political and economic systems at the same time, whereas China was very careful. Probably, they were watching what happened to Russia. They only changed the economic system – even then, they

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still maintained elements of their old economic system. The political system remained a one-party rule, and because of that, they are able to achieve much more.

THC : You have been described by political observers as quite an enigma. In an interview with *The Straits Times*, your daughter said you could be quite shy and self-effacing with friends and not prone to making small talk. Conversely, the world sees you as a very strong and tough leader, uncompromising, outspoken and critical. Would you say you are a very shy person at heart, or are you an outgoing and outspoken person?

Dr M : I am a very private person. I do not like to mix too much with people, unless they

THC : You wrote that you were a bit of a rebel in school. You used to do very well in school, but you were a rebel and your teachers did not like you very much.

Dr M : I never got to become a prefect until almost the last day in school – simply because my teacher, Mr Lim Chen Chai, said it was good for me to be a prefect. If I were to apply for a job, the fact that I was a school prefect counts as a good reference.

WCY : I remember when I was much younger, I heard you give a lecture in Singapore, at the Academy of Medicine's Singapore-Malaysia Congress, and you said that doctors make better politicians than lawyers. If a young medical student wanted to be a politician, and he asked you whether



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are people I am very familiar with. But I am forced to interact with people because of the need for me to in the struggles of politics. You come against people of different ideologies or different perceptions of things, and you have to interact, you have to put your case forward. And when you put a case forward, even when you talk softly, but you differ from them, they feel that you are not pliable. They like you to be pliable.

THC : So obviously you are not a populist but more a pragmatic and consistent politician.

Dr M : I am not a populist. I do things that people may not like but which I think is good for them. And even if they do not like me, I am going to do it.

he should do Medicine or Law, what advice would you give him now?

Dr M : Even if you have ambitions to become a politician, it is good to have a medical background because doctors are taught to be sympathetic and to care. Lawyers only see their clients. Even if a lawyer knows that the client is guilty, he is going to defend by whatever means is possible, because that is his kind of job. As a doctor, you have to handle your patient gently. Before, we never tell people what they are actually suffering from, but nowadays they can sue you if you do not tell them. So we are taught to be gentle and sympathetic. These are patients, sick people.

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WCY : So if you had a chance now, would you choose Law or Medicine for yourself?

Dr M : I think I will choose Medicine, because now I understand what Medicine is about.

WCY : Recently, you gave an interview to Channel NewsAsia, and said that the hardest thing that you encountered as Prime Minister was trying to change the mindset of people. If you were to be given now, another 22 years as Prime Minister, and with your current wisdom and experience, how would you approach this problem? Would you approach it any differently from last time?

Dr M : I would still continue with the effort. I appreciate that it is not easy to change mindsets

a borderless world in which the borderlessness is for their capital, their firms, and all that. Now, for poor Asians, a borderless world means they can go to the rich countries in large numbers. But of course, when you say that, the Chinese, the Indians, maybe a hundred million Indians migrate to Europe, they say it is not on. But they say it is borderless, so if it is borderless, then we can go. But they say it is borderless only to their capital going into our place. So this is the thing that I disagree with, about the interpretation of what is globalisation.

WCY : What would be a good competitive interpretation that East Asia can adopt?

Dr M : We have to take into consideration the stage of development of a country. You have a competition between a giant and a midget,



– actually, to change the culture of people. But you have to keep on hammering at them. The Communists have got their gatherings together for self-criticism, in order to reach a value that would continue towards their success. Maybe that would be one method.

WCY : You also said that in the interest of Asia, East Asia must compete with the West to define what is globalisation, and that the West does not have a monopoly of defining it. What would be your definition of globalisation?

Dr M : It is the West who conceived globalisation; not us, we did not conceive it. They conceived it and interpreted it. I am not against globalisation, but I am against the interpretation of what constitutes globalisation. They see, for example,

who do you think will win? Here you have powerful, rich countries saying that we open our markets so they can sell their goods to us. But they are very restrictive about their markets, not necessarily legally, but by other means like non-tariff barriers and things like that.

WCY : I was told that you are not very comfortable being known as the Father of Modernisation. Is that true?

Dr M : It was all started by the first Prime Minister. The moment we became Independent, we began the process of modernisation. If at all, maybe I accelerated the pace a bit. That is all. Otherwise, the country was already progressing. I did not change very much.



THC : What are some of your memories of the best times in politics, and perhaps some of the most difficult? Would there be some times of your life you wished you could have changed, and some times which you relish with a great deal of fond memories?

Dr M : To be elected popularly by the people repeatedly, that is very satisfying. If you do not deliver, they will not elect you. Maybe they will elect somebody from the same party. But if you are not able to deliver, I doubt they would return you so many times. The difficult times are usually regarding how to uplift the Malays so that they come to the same level as the others; how to reduce disparities; and how to handle some foreign interference in the country.

THC : What fascinates me is how you can be outspoken and controversial and air your views frankly to the world media. There was the recent walk-out by the British High Commissioner due to some statements that you had made about terrorism. In America and the UK, if politicians made certain statements that appeared politically incorrect, the media would likely have eaten them for lunch. Even the President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, almost had to resign when he made the comment that women were not as qualified as men in the areas of

Science and Mathematics. You have somehow transcended the sticky media onslaught that other politicians have had to face. How do you do it?

Dr M : If you say something against the British, it does not mean that all the British people agree with their own stand. There are lots of business people who disagree with their government. So while we chastise their government, at the same time, we invite their business people to come and invest here. They do invest, because in the first place, it is good, and secondly, they do not agree with their own government. And the United States is one of the big investors in Malaysia, almost 20%.

THC : It has been said that your favourite song is *My Way* from Frank Sinatra. Is that true?

Dr M : I do not know. People presume that because I like to do things my way, that this is the song for me. What they forget is that the first line says: "And now the end is near." It is almost like hinting to me that I should go off. Now, it is alright, I am out of the government, they can sing that. But before, when I was still in the government, it says "and now the end is near", it is not very good.

THC : It is very kind of you to have honoured us with this interview. Thank you very much. ■