

"I AM STILL HERE"

Asiaweek's complete interview with Mahathir Mohamad.

THOUGH SHOWING SIGNS OF a lingering cold, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was outgoing and outspoken when he met with Asiaweek Editor Ann Morrison and Kuala Lumpur-based correspondents Roger Mitton and Steven K.C. Poh. Here is an edited transcript.

Has ASEAN lived up to its promise?

I would say so. It has delivered. There were times when I had doubts about it, but some how or other ASEAN has weathered through and has achieved some coherence in its policies and activities. We have learned from each other about what is the right thing to do, what is the thing not to do. For example, initially there were some members who were ultra-nationalist and wanted to nationalize all foreign holdings and have less to do with foreign investments. Others felt that their focus should be on politics and their relationship with the other countries. But now it is different. All of them are concentrating on economic development, on what is good for their people, and how to cooperate more closely with their neighbors and forget their differences. As a result, we have become, perhaps, the most peaceful area. We have no wars.

Isn't it tough to forget differences, when they are so serious?

They are not pronounced. I would like to stress that ASEAN is a political organization. It was not meant to be an economic grouping. We came together because we had problems with our neighbors and we needed to sit down and discuss them. Subsequently, of course, we began to focus on economic development. There were some people who immediately assumed that ASEAN would be a kind of a little copy of the European Union (E.U.). But we came together because we had problems.

Will ASEAN develop along the lines of the E.U.?

Not for a long time. I don't think it can go that way so easily because the diversity here is much greater than in Europe. There are people of different religions and different cultures which divide us. We cannot overcome all these things simply because of economic necessity.

You said not for a long time, but perhaps in the long term future?

I can't really predict what's going to happen 50 years or a 100 years down the road. People might change, but I don't see it happening - at least not in my life time. And even after that.

Will ASEAN admit Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos this year?

I think that could happen. And it should happen. I see no reason why we should take into consideration internal matters when we come together. We, too, have been guilty of the same things these other countries are accused of. For example, during the Ferdinand Marcos period, there was no democracy in the Philippines, but we never asked them to leave ASEAN. There was a time in Thailand when there was a military leadership, yet we did not ask them to leave. And our democracies are not the same. We have different concepts of democracy. I don't think we should hold this against any member country.

Why the hurry to admit these three nations?

Because we think it will have a very positive effect on them. They are afraid of the democratic process, because they have never seen how it works. It may work in Europe, but if they don't see that it can work in an Asian country, in an ASEAN country, they will not be convinced. It is much more convincing to see how Malaysia manages its free market and its system of democracy than if they were to see the vague democracies of Europe. Over time, they will tend to give more voice to the people. But it is difficult for them to put their house in order so quickly. We can't wait until they put their house in order before admitting them to ASEAN. They become a member first, then put their house in order.

You feel that these new members like Myanmar may become more democratic then?

I think over time people tend to give more voice to the people. They have to be influenced by the people. They need the people. Because you can't stand alone - unless, of course, you want to stop developing the country."

Do you find the present regime in Myanmar offensive?

No, they are definitely an improvement on previous regimes. You must remember that not so long ago, Burma was trying to practice the Burmese way of socialism - a total isolationist policy. They said they don't care what the rest of the world thinks. So they don't have any idea at all about how to be more democratic. They were totally opposed to any kind of opposition. Under the previous government, I'm quite sure Aung San Suu Kyi would be kept inside.

Yet they had elections in 1990 that, by and large, were free and fair. And they did not honor them. As an advocate of democracy, you must find that disturbing?

They feel that election was merely to determine the right to draw up a new constitution which they needed."

But then they put Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Well, I mean, if you go around agitating people to go against the government, governments, normally anywhere, would act against that. Even in a democratic country. Just because you don't have these things happening in Europe doesn't mean that if people go around asking, for example, some Neo-fascists to come in and advocate violently over-throwing the government. I think even democratic countries would take action against such neo-fascists.

You are against sanctions on Myanmar?

You know the first thing that the big powers think of is to squeeze such smaller countries. Hurt them and therefore they will comply. This doesn't work. Because Burma has already proven that it was quite capable of cutting itself off from the rest of the world. They are not going to starve. They've got lots of food. They've got lots of resources. They will stay that way. We think that it's better to have contact with them - fostering constructive engagement.

In fact, isn't Cambodia more problematic regarding ASEAN entry this year?

It will go through that period. Because we all go through the same thing. It's not easy suddenly to switch from an autocratic government to a democratic government. We tell people that you can change the government, and people want to change the government just because they want to. Look at what 's happened in Albania. That 's democracy gone crazy. We tell the people you can

demonstrate in the streets and you can bring down the government. So they demonstrated, brought down the government, and now what do they have? Anarchy.

In ASEAN you do not criticize each another. Why?

Because we are not in a position to judge others. The West thinks that it is so very right and correct that it can sit in judgment and even prosecute people. We don't think that is right at all, because the West has got many sins. We admit that we're not perfect and we should allow people to try and correct what is wrong with them. Our way is to talk to people; to have contact with them; to try and show that it is quite all right to do these things because it works. That it brings something good.

Yet in a way, Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew criticized you with his comment about lawlessness in your southern state of Johor. What did you think about that?

I was reasonably angry, I suppose. But the Malaysian people reacted much more strongly. That is to be expected. After all, it was unjust and it was undiplomatic. You don't say that kind of thing when you are a neighbor and a good friend. If you go and tell your friend to their face that they are a criminal, then the friend must not be very friendly. It was uncalled for.

How are relations now?

Back to normal.

You are against any single power dominating the ASEAN region.

Yes, nobody should dominate anybody else. We should treat each other as equals. Maybe there are those who are a little bit more powerful and others a bit less powerful, but throwing your weight around and giving orders is not the way to conduct international relations. The United States has a tendency to impose things on others even to the extent of using American laws in other countries. Those are extra-territorial rights which it doesn't have. You can't go and arrest the leader of another country because he breaks your laws in his own country. But as regards a continued American presence, we believe that the sea is open. If the Seventh Fleet wants to sail around in the open sea, that's their business. But they must not clash, say, with the Chinese who may decide to sail in the same open seas. Then we will have a war in our hands.

Is the South China Sea a problematic area?

There is a problem, but it's not insoluble. There hasn't been a war yet. It has been predicted that we'll fight each other, but we haven't yet. There have been slight skirmishes here and there between Vietnamese and Chinese, but China has accepted that we should discuss this with ASEAN. When the Chinese put their rigs in what the Vietnamese claim to be their waters, we said that it is wrong. And China has responded to that very positively.

What about the arms build-up in the region?

You can't expect us to buy older weapons than those we already have. Obviously when our weapons have become out of date, we have to buy new ones. And when we buy new ones, we buy the latest. So what we're doing is just renewing the weapons we have. Of course, if we have a little bit more money, we'll buy a little bit more. Back in the 1960s, when we bought the F-5s, that's all that we could afford. Do you want us to buy another set of F-5s?

I have always pointed out that in 1945 when MacArthur told the Japanese that they should not spend more than 1% of their GDP on their armed forces, that 1% was tiny. Today, that 1% is much bigger than what Britain spends on her armed forces. We have to accept that 1% is a lot of money now.

But who exactly is the perceived enemy?

No enemy. We just have to keep up to date with these things. We need to have armed forces -- unless the rest of the world decides that there will be a ban on arms and these very brilliant scientists in the West stop inventing new weapons. You know, they are continuously coming out with more and more sophisticated weapons. And they come to us and they say: you buy this. If we say we don't want to, they go to the other chap and they say: those people don't want these, do you want them? And when they buy, then of course we have to buy. I think that not only should we ban nuclear weapons, we should ban conventional weapons - except the most unsophisticated kind. I don't want to spend money on arms. I would rather have bows and arrows if everybody else would do the same.

Indeed, ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) is still part of the credo of ASEAN, so that ideally you would prefer the region to be devoid of arms?

Yes, devoid. But then you must remember, .outside of ZOPFAN, there are people who can hurl things into ZOPFAN. And you have to think about that. I think that not only should we ban nuclear weapons, we should ban conventional weapons - except the most unsophisticated, just a few guns. But they keep on investing missiles, UPVs, and all kinds of things. We are forced to buy. Otherwise, they will sell to somebody else.

Are you worried about China?

No, I am not worried about China. I am not worried about Japan. I am not even worried about America. Because I don't foresee an invasion. But I do foresee a lot of pressures. But why should we fear China? If you identify a country as your future enemy, it becomes your present enemy -- because then they will identify you as an enemy and there will be tension. We have been colonized not by the Chinese. We have been colonized by European countries. We should fear European countries more.

What do you think about Britain's push for more democracy in Hong Kong before it returns the territory to China?

I think it is the height of hypocrisy. For more than one hundred years, the British never thought of ruling Hong Kong as a democracy. Now, just before it has to hand Hong Kong back to China, it suddenly decides there must be democracy, and that it going to defend democracy to the last drop of the Hong Kong people's blood. Surely, the world must see the hypocrisy of the whole thing. There was no elected legislature before. Everything was done from Whitehall in London. Orders were given. The armed forces were totally British. Everything was run by them. And then suddenly they realize that by 1997 it has to be handed over. Ah, we must have democracy. What is this?

Will Hong Kong be used by the West against China?

That's what they want to do. They want to find an excuse to hit China. They are afraid of China. We believe in the one-China policy. We believe that Taiwan is a part of China. But how the Taiwanese and the Chinese resolve this problem is entirely up to them.

Domestically, how will the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) propel Malaysia to its next phase of development?

The fact is that the media are now beyond control by any country. We talk about a borderless world and nothing is more borderless than in that field. Somebody said we can receive signals from a satellite using a clothes hanger. So how do you control people? We know that lots of rubbish is coming through, but at the moment we do not know how we can sift through it or censor it. So if it has to come through, let's see how we can play a role. And if we cannot play a role ourselves, we will avail facilities for other people to do something. Then, we can observe and learn.

What will attract companies to the MSC?

For the first time, we have a definite area with definite policies and definite laws -- as well as a government that is friendly to these companies. We want to make them comfortable here. Other places would identify one street for this purpose and talk in very general terms about it, but we have started in defining the area, defining the policies and we have cyber laws which are ahead of most countries in the world. We are going to put in all the necessary infrastructure, and we are going to welcome everybody, even foreigners. So we have offered everything the multimedia people want. The whole MSC area has become a sort of special territory. All kinds of things can happen. We have to experiment with them and if they succeed here, the whole world benefits. You can see that they have responded.

Does Malaysia have the kind of research facilities for this purpose?

We work with Stanford (University). We work with every university that wants to do research. All we are saying is that you come here and set up your facilities here and we will help you in whatever way a government can. You have a government there as well which you can fiddle around with to see how a new government can function in the electronic age; in the information age.

You mean when you relocate to Putrajaya?

We are talking about an electronic government. Lots of people talk about the electronic government, but what exactly or actually will that be? You say, well we have the electronic kiosks. Okay, that's simple, but how do you legalize something that's transacted through the computer? How do you verify your signature? All kinds of things can happen. So we have to experiment with them and if they succeed there, the whole world benefits.

How do you bring investors to the MSC? There are so many traffic jams, power outages, etc.?

I think we have made progress on this power thing. I mean power failures happened in New York twice when I was there. You know I had to walk down from the Plaza Hotel on the staircase because there was no power. It can happen in New York. And it happened recently in the West Coast of the United States. So let's not give the impression that only in Malaysia there are power outages. We are taking measures to try and make sure that all the infrastructure are in place. And we are going to have this system where all the cables and pipes and whatever are put in place before anything starts. We are starting from a greenfield site.

There all kinds of technology from data storage, to wafer fabrication to software creation. What kinds of technologies would you hope to attract to the MSC?

People who will do research certainly (in multimedia), people who will provide the content like computer animation and all kinds of new software in that area to maximize the research. There will be manufacturing of very sophisticated components. There will also be a new university that's focused entirely on multimedia; it's almost an international university because others will participate in it. There will also be a virtual university, smart schools, security composite cards, etc.

In the International Advisor Panel (IAP) meeting in the U.S. Acer chief Stan Shih was said to have told you that for the MSC to succeed, Malaysia should not count too much on foreign expertise. According to Shih, from the Taiwan experience, it's the local people, the local companies that will realize the MSC. Do you share that view?

Not completely. Malaysia's development is not solely the work of the local people. We have been one of the biggest recipients of foreign direct investments. And as a result we have developed. Foreigners invest and the locals get to learn about manufacturing, training and how to do business. And today more of the investments are coming from the locals. So it's a question of which one comes first. I mean, if you have the capacity to do business on your own, why not. But we don't have. That's why we are saying we will accept knowledge workers (to help us).

Is continued 7% growth really achievable?

Well, that is what we are aiming for, because that means doubling every ten years. It's achievable. We have achieved 6.7% over the past 20 years prior to this, so it's only 0.3% off. If you look at Malaysia, our rate of growth has always been higher than most other developing countries with major economies. Maybe there is something that we know about how to manage the economy that has resulted in this. We do know the people. We know the kind of reaction we will get and how to communicate with them. And because of that we have been able to bring them on board and they support our action. It's very difficult to do anything positive if the people are not with you.

What about the economic disasters like BMF, the tin market, Perwaja, Bank Negara forex dealings and so on?

Yes, there have been mistakes, disasters. But these you have to take in your stride. The tin fiasco - nobody talks about it now. BMF, okay, there was a problem, but we resolved it. Today, Bank Bumiputra is doing well. Given time, without too much distraction from our detractors, we can overcome these so-called disasters. They are not disasters really. We mismanaged once or twice, but we have been able to recover. We have created wealth for the people. They had nothing at all before, but now they have this wealth.

The wealth that we created, we lost it and then we recovered it. But we do not take money from the people. I mean, we don't, for example, collect some pyramidal scheme like in Albania. We did not collect money from the people. We created this wealth for the people. They had nothing at all before we created the wealth, but now they have the wealth. And we mismanaged once or twice, but we have been able to recover.

How did you create such wealth?

We experimented. We set up government companies. We trained executives. Sometimes we identify the right formula, sometimes we don't. I mean, we are human. We cannot be expected to make 100% perfect decisions all the time. When we look at other countries, some have made even worse mistakes. By and large, we have done quite well restructuring. Affirmative action is one of the most difficult things to do and yet it has succeeded in this country. The fact remains

that today we have a much more peaceful situation because the indigenous people no longer feel threatened. They feel that they can cope and they can compete with others.

What do you think your success rate is in terms of selecting the right candidates, the right entrepreneurs to develop the country?

I never really made an assessment of that. But the fact remains that today we have a much more peaceful situation in Malaysia because the indigenous people no longer feel threatened. They feel that they can cope. And they can compete with others. So that has contributed towards the healthy relationship in this country between the races.

You said (earlier) that "We know something about how to manage the economy." What sort of advice would you give to other developing countries?

I won't presume to advise anybody. We feel that we know the situation in this country. We know the people. We know the kind of reaction we will get and how to communicate with them. (And) because of that we have been able to bring them on board and they support our action. It's very difficult to do anything positive if the people are not with you. You know when we fought against the Communists, one of the things we stressed was to win the hearts and minds of the people. And this is one country where the guerrilla movement failed completely because the people did not join the guerrillas; did not support the guerrillas. They supported the government. So, I think we understand our people.

The Philippines hopes you will continue to invest there, but you were quoted after the Manila Hotel affair as saying Malaysian investors might not go into the Philippines again.

I don't know if I was quoted correctly. But what I meant was that for the time there will be a sort of unhappiness.

Let the dust settle?

But it was settled and now they are investigating and I think Renong has decided not to reduce its involvement in the Philippines. It's going there.

Do you feel another disaster is on the horizon with Bakun, for instance?

No, I think Bakun is going to be a good project.

Have the Malays caught up with the other races, especially the Chinese?

They have made progress, but they have not caught up. We need to do a lot more for them. We think there is an even chance that they can catch up provided we can set them on the right track.

Malaysia being predominantly a Muslim country, do you find it hard to stimulate development here? There are some Muslims who genuinely think progress is UN-Islamic.

Well, I think that is the wrong interpretation of Islam. Islam has never been against progress. As a matter of fact the nomadic, backward Arabs, when they became Muslims became a very progressive people. They learned all about the sciences, mathematics and developed all kinds of skills. And that's how they spread Islam. Because of their progress.

Is it difficult to balance those Malay Muslims with strong religious views and those who prefer a more secular society?

We don't talk about Muslims being more secular. We think of Muslims being Muslims, that's all. There is no secularity in Islam because everything that we do is related to religion. But some people misinterpret the religion. They read only some parts of the Koran, and they think that is the whole of religion, but it is not. The Koran is very specific about learning about all the things that are around you and understanding the power of God. These people don't seem to pay any attention to certain parts of the teachings of Islam. So we think we are more fundamental than them. We stick to the real teachings of Islam.

Will a future Malaysia be more Islamic?

If it is compatible with development, if it is not a hindrance to development, I don't see why we cannot be more Islamic. Although, I don't understand the term 'more Islamic'. We think that people can only be Islamic -- not more Islamic, or less Islamic.

Yet many associate more Islamic societies with terrorism, polygamy and Islamic 'hudud' laws which permit cutting off the hands of criminals?

But why focus on that? How many of us cut off people's hands and all that? And talking of terrorism, look at what's happening in the West. Who brought down that building in Oklahoma? The first reaction, of course, was that it must be a Muslim. In fact, it was a Christian. But you don't call that Christian terrorism. If you look back in the past, the Spanish Inquisition was one of the worst periods in history, but we don't think that it was an expression of Christianity. We think it is an aberration. Similarly in the Muslim community, there will be aberrations. People who misinterpret the religion and who do all kinds of funny things. But that is not typical of Islam. I hope the media will also help to give a better picture. The Japanese Aum sect is not labeled as Buddhist terrorism. They are Buddhist, they kill people. But they are not called terrorists. The Catholics in Northern Ireland kill people and the Protestants do likewise, but they are not called Protestant terrorists and Catholic terrorists. They're just called Irish terrorists. The same thing happened in Lebanon.

Why have you called for reform of the way jurists interpret Islamic law?

Jurists are ordinary human beings. They are not the Prophet. They don't come with a message from God. They just interpret what they read and their interpretation may be wrong. We think that if you interpret the teachings of Islam properly, hudud laws - as interpreted by the jurists - would be considered as UN-Islamic. Because in the Koran, over and over again, it stresses the need for justice. You must have justice. Now how can you consider it just when you discriminate against some people, women for example?

You called the opposition Islamic Party (PAS) "a time bomb among the Malays." Do you fear PAS so much?

Yes and no. Because you have to recognize the signs early. If you recognize the signs early and take action early, then it doesn't develop into a time bomb. But if you don't recognize the signs and warn the people, then it can develop into a bomb. So that has always been our approach to problems. Recognize them early and act before they explode.

There's a lot of talk these days about social problems among youth, do you feel that religion and moral values should be emphasized more in schools to deal with this problem?

Again, the key is to recognize these problems early. And right now we think that we are still in the position to tackle it. When the thing has spread throughout the community you cannot stop it. So, at this moment we can still act and we think that the teaching of Islam, the stress on the teaching

of Islam, can play a role. I mean, some of us think that stress point is really not helping to overcome some of the problems that we face.

You were somewhat anti-establishment during your youth. Are you forgetting this when criticizing the youth today?

It begins with exuberance but if you tolerate exuberance, immediately it becomes a habit. And you have a problem.

You are not quite an out-spoken Malay nationalists these days. Nobody calls you an ultra anymore. Have you mellowed in that sense?

I was never an ultra. That was a label given to me because I tended to speak my mind. I call a spade a spade, as they say. So one way to negate the effect of anybody is to label him as being slightly off center. A little bit mad. That way, anything that he says will be treated as coming from a mad man or an ultra. I was never an ultra. I was just willing to speak my mind. Even now, I'm still saying it. I never minced words. If I find something wrong, I'll say it, whether it is with regard to the Malays or with regard to the Chinese or with regard to other countries - big or small - I just speak my mind. I think things need to be said and I'll say it.

How do you see your role as head of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)? Some say it is more important than being Prime Minister?

Yes, I depend on my party. Because without my party I am nothing. So I consider it important that I explain to the party what the government is doing. I have that obligation. And I consider also my speech to UMNO every year as the most important speech that I give, because it sets the tone for the party.

It was UMNO's 50th anniversary last year -- and your 16th as Prime Minister. Isn't that too long?

People will think it is too long. But one thing that you can be sure of is that the certainty of your demise will undermine your ability to run the country. The problem with many countries is that their leaders are only allowed to do one term. People don't respect that one term because you are going to go out anyway.

In the late sixties, you were in a small group, Musa Hitam was another, who felt the Tunku was "out of touch" and believed that the time was ripe for change. Surely you can understand if there are some young turks in the party today who may feel that way about you?

Well, perhaps there are some who feel that way about me, but on the other hand, there are others who want me to be president (of UMNO) for life. Of course, I may be wrong in my assessment, but at the moment, the people who want me out are not as many as those who want me to stay in. Besides, I don't want to stay here forever.

Why did you use your position as president of UMNO to prevent a challenge to the leadership posts last year?

Because it will break up the party. It's not healthy for the party. There is nothing to be gained. My idea is that when I hand over the party to my successor, I will hand over the whole party. I don't want to have a factionalized party, which when the other chap wins, and he gets the party, he gets only his faction. The other faction stays out. That will weaken the party. I have made this very clear to all the members that I want to hand over the party intact, whole, without one faction

saying that, well, now that our leader has gone, we are not going to participate any more. I want them to still keep on backing the new leader. So let's not split the party into factions.

But under the UMNO constitution, a leadership vote is normal at each triennial assembly?

It is true. It is not absolutely impossible for people to stand against me. They can still reject my advice. But the fact that they accepted my advice is a measure of support that they give me.

Do you value loyalty above all else?

You have to have loyalty. Because, you know, there are parties like the LDP in Japan where every Prime Minister gets two years. You know what happens? -- there is no government. It is the civil servants who run the government. We can't have that, because the civil servants also can do as much wrong as the politicians.

You said in an earlier interview that you had problems with your first deputy Musa Hitam, but that you had no problems with your second deputy Ghafar Baba - except the party decided to replace Ghafar. It seemed to imply you would have preferred to stick with Ghafar?

Yes, I would have been happy to have Ghafar continue. But obviously there was a lot of opposition and a lot of dissatisfaction. And they indicated in many ways that they wanted a change. So, while I was prepared to stand by and be loyal to my deputy, I found that I could not be disloyal to so many of the party members. I accepted that.

So you came to terms with having Anwar?

Well, I had to. Apparently, he has the support.

You are happy with him now?

Well, I can't be changing deputies all the time. I think if you change deputies too many times, it must be because you are wrong and not them. I have a very simple measure for this. If you dislike too many people than you are wrong. Or the other way round. If you are together with a lot of people, then I think you are likely to be right.

The talk of a rift between you and Anwar arose because he sometimes seems to publicly take a different line to you. Do you object to that?

No, I don't object. I don't think he is different. He says things in a different way perhaps because the words he uses are more conciliatory, but his views are exactly the same as mine. I know that. He's much more academic. He likes to quote, but he says the same thing. I just give my opinion, I don't read very much.

Some say Anwar will be more conservative than you?

I don't expect anybody to be exactly the same as me. I have also said that one man's style is quite different from another man's, but the principle stays the same. His way of doing things and my way of doing things will differ in matters of details. But generally, we agree.

You said, "I have no intention to stay on until I am senile, but before that, please don't disturb me." Is someone disturbing you?

No, just minor pin pricks here and there. Some mosquito bites.

The issue of corruption has come up a lot recently. Do you feel happy that all your colleagues in the National Front leadership are corruption-free?

I am not happy because I think there's too much tendency to influence people, using money for example. But again I would like to say that we have to nip this in the bud. We have to stop this at an early stage. Once it involves everyone, you can't touch it anymore because you can't touch one without affecting the other. So it is better to tackle it (corruption) when it is small before the thing is spread throughout the party and everybody's involved. We want to be effective.

What about Mat Taib?

Well, his fault was he got involved in what we call a scandal. And although it is not yet proven, we don't want it to affect the party. That is his problem and he should resolve it. If he can resolve it, okay, very good. But if he cannot resolve it, then he will have to take whatever that's coming for him.

Your sons have become immensely wealthy in business. You don't fear allegations of nepotism?

Yes ... I fear that. But if you ask my children, they resent this very much because they say I'm trying to stop them from doing business. They don't do business with the government. They do business among themselves. They go and buy companies in the U.S. and companies in Hong Kong. How do I influence those companies to sell to them?

But within Malaysia ...

Within Malaysia, they do some business. Of course you can't be entirely free of the government. But I have nothing to do with (the deals). If there's anything at all connected with them, I don't preside (in the meetings).

How do you feel about the fact the you're probably Asia's paramount leader now that Deng Xiaoping is gone?

I think that's very funny. I don't aspire to be any paramount leader anywhere. I'll be very happy if I'm still accepted in my country. There's lots of work to do here.

How do you set your priorities?

I think I'm here to do a job which the Prime Minister can do. That's the basic premise. Others cannot because they are not the Prime Minister. So as a Prime Minister, I must exercise the prerogative to make things happen. I must say that at times I have been impatient (with some people). I don't have time. The reason why things happen quickly in this country is because we don't have patience for bureaucracies. Some of the papers have been kept KIV. People say I'll get back to you. To me, that is an invitation for corruption. People who want to hurry it up will offer something.

Is Malaysia a democratic government?

Yes, it is still a democratic government. If you don't want the present leader, you can throw him out. That's the most important thing about democracy. In other systems you can't throw the leader out. But the right to disrupt the peace of the country, the right to stop other people from doing

business by your demonstration, the right to agitate people . . . that is not essentially a part of democracy. And you can see that in Albania. That's the democracy which I don't want.

It's hard to throw you out when you control the media ...

Well, it's possible. We have been thrown out before. I've lost my election before. I think it is wrong to assume that the local media is under my control. Please go and read what the PAS paper writes about me. Libelous things. But I didn't take any action against them in the courts. And you should read what the DAP says about me. You should read some of the reporting in the vernacular papers. Don't just read the New Straits Times. They (vernacular papers) write nasty things about the government. So how can you say we control (media)? We have some influence because we happen to be supported by the editors of these newspapers. In Europe, there are Conservative papers and there are Labour papers. That doesn't mean that they control the papers. If the papers don't like you, they will say nasty things.

We lost elections. We lost the state of Kelantan, we lost the state of Sabah and in 1969 we almost lost the whole country. So how can you say we have so much control the media as if the media will determines everything? I don't think so.

You feel that should be relatively uncensored?

I think one day the world must decide what can go into the TV and what cannot. I think that people all over the world are worried about this. America is worried; Germany is worried. Why should you put into the Internet pornographic things that can be downloaded by some child of ten years old? What are you trying to do? Is it good? You say that this is good. You want children to be corrupted?

This is just a rogue individual though, not a group.

A rogue individual can help influence millions of children throughout the world. Surely governments must have some responsibility in containing rogues. Unless, of course, we say that rogues are as free as ordinary people. Then let's have criminals roaming around the world doing their thing.

What makes a good leader?

You should lead. At the same time, you should be sensitive to what your followers think. But if you just respond to the followers and do exactly what they want, then you're not a leader. You have to come out with ideas all the time.

Do you enjoy power?

I am not saying that I enjoy power, but I find that it is useful in carrying out the things you want to carry out. If you don't have power and you put out a very reasonable proposal, nobody will implement it. You have to have power.

But it can become addictive which is why some suggest you don't want to let it go.

No, it's not the question of not wanting to let it go. I sense, I may be wrong of course, that people do not want me to go just yet. They keep on telling me that. Of course, they may be sycophants. But the fact is that they say that what I am doing has made the country what it is today. Well, they say, I may be wrong, they may be wrong.

What is your single greatest achievement?

Well, I don't know. That I am still here is an achievement.