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Mahathir bin Mohamad [Malaysia, Prime Minister]

Mahathir bin Mohamad

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Interviewee: **MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD**
Interviewer: Donna Cheng
Date: 1 November 2016
Location: Singapore

00:00:19

[Donna Cheng](#)

Dr Mahathir, thank you for making time of this, and being part of Digital Narratives of Asia, to share your personal leadership journey with us.

00:00:26

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Yes, you're welcome.

00:00:28

[Donna Cheng](#)

Your political career has spanned more than seventy years, twenty-two years as Prime Minister. Do you remember the first day you stepped into office, leading Malaysia as Prime Minister?

00:00:42

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Yes, vaguely I remember a feeling of trepidation, because I was going to shoulder all the responsibilities of governing this country, and that is something very big for me. My experience is usually as a subordinate working under other people. Now, I am not working under anybody. I am on my own, and I have to be responsible. That creates a little bit of fear that I might fail.

00:01:28

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, what drove you? Fear can drive you into paralysis, or it can drive you into moving forward, and stepping up to that role. What drove you?

00:01:38

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

I have always believed in confronting problems, and finding solutions to them, and in the past for example, I used to be afraid of dogs. Then somebody told me that if you run away, the dog will chase you. So, stop and face the dog, and pretend that you're going to pick up a stone. Although I was frightened, I turned around, stopped, and did just that. I find that if you confront, you are much more able to overcome.

00:02:16

[Donna Cheng](#)

What were some of the biggest fears at that point? Stepping up, it's a big role, right? But there were clearly issues then that were heaviest. What would that be?

00:02:27

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

At the time when I took over, the country's economy was not doing very well. I knew I was going to face a lot of problem, and I wondered whether I could overcome, come up with ideas about how to overcome the economic downturn. But later on, I found that by studying the causes in depth, then I was able to find a solution. Initially of course, I was very scared that I might not be able to come up with good ideas.

00:03:05

[Donna Cheng](#)

You pressed on, right? So, after twenty-two years when you stepped down, how different were you as a leader then, compared to that first day where there was anxiety?

00:03:17

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Yes, I felt more confident, and I thought that others would have the same confidence because over twenty-two years, I was faced with a lot of problems, and most of them I

was able to solve. I thought that other people would be just like me. They would be able to learn about all the problems, and the causes, and overcome them.

00:03:48

[Donna Cheng](#)

In that twenty-two years, there were a lot of issues. It wasn't always smooth sailing. What were, probably one or two that stuck with you, as really trying times?

00:03:58

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

One of them was of course the currency crisis. Then there was a time when I was challenged by my, the other leaders in the party. They contested against me, and I had to accept the fact that I was dependent upon support of the members of the General Assembly. Of course, I was not certain whether I was going to win or not. But in the end of course, I was able to win and remain as Prime Minister. But there are others also which are not so big. I had to face resignation by my deputy. I had problem with trying to find a deputy who's able to handle matters.

00:04:55

[Donna Cheng](#)

People relations, for a leader... often you find that leaders when they come on strong, or brain isn't the only thing that keeps you going, you need people. How have you developed that relationship with people, and to get a team going, because it's not a one-man show?

00:05:14

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

I was trained as a doctor, and I practiced medicine for twenty years before I became a Minister in the government. During that twenty years, I learnt how to interact with largely my patients, and their relatives, then the problems faced by them. I had learned to be sympathetic to what they are troubled with, and to have to help find a solution for their problems. And in politics, it is practically the same. People come with problems, or there are problems for the country. As far as people are concerned, I have to understand what is it that is troubling them, whether it is real, or imagined. And recognising the problems I try to find solutions to that. So, in the end of course if you help a person to overcome his problem, he's going to be very supportive of you.

00:06:21

[Donna Cheng](#)

For yourself, sometimes there will be disappointments, when people resign for example. How do you overcome that? Do you feel betrayed? How do you overcome these feelings? It's human.

00:06:33

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

I was saddened by the acts of some of my colleagues, particularly the First Deputy Prime Minister, whom I knew even before we became members of the government. I thought that since he has won, he would work with me closely. But unfortunately, I think a lot of his subordinates influenced him. The problem with the... what I would call the lieutenants, is that they want to push their boss up, so that when their boss goes up, they too would benefit. They keep on pushing, and I think he felt that I was in office too long. Because previously, the two Prime Ministers before me, lasted only about six years, or five years. So, at the end of my five years as Prime Minister, my deputy felt that it's time that I step down and give it to him.

00:07:45

[Donna Cheng](#)

This feeling of being misjudged... or have your intentions misread, how do you overcome something like that?

00:07:56

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

I had a job to do, and I felt that I need to implement things. It is one thing to be entrusted with authority, but you have to learn to use the authority, and it takes time. And by the time I understood how to handle things, I felt that I need time to implement. If I need to stop, then I think lots of things will not be implemented, and I wouldn't know whether they're good or bad.

00:08:33

[Donna Cheng](#)

You mentioned the financial crisis, and that was something that you had to make a decision that wasn't popular. In fact, you went against the IMF (International Monetary

Fund) and you also pegged the... you increased your government spending, and you pegged the Ringgit to US Dollar, and Malaysia rose from that far quicker than your other ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) neighbours. What was your thinking at that point, what drove you to know that that's the right decision to go?

00:09:02

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

It took me quite a lot of time, more than a year in fact. During that period, I had to learn about financing, about banking, because you cannot handle something you don't understand. I even asked friends, who were familiar with currency trading. I wanted to know how currency trading is done, how money moves around when they are traded. Once I understand how this process is carried out, this trade in currencies, then I realise that there are places where I can intervene and stop the currency trading. It took me a long time before I discovered how to stop currency trading, because I believe it was currency trading that had depressed the value of the Malaysian Ringgit.

00:09:59

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, it was you being able to step back from a situation and say, "Look, I have to relearn, I have to learn something new." Would that be a quality that you think leaders need to continually go through, to learn, and relearn?

00:10:13

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Leaders must understand the problem, the basis, the causes of the problem. If they don't understand the causes of the problem, they cannot solve the problem. It took time, but I had even to read books on banking in order to understand how banks work. I had to ask bankers about banking, and about currency trading, etcetera. I was very conversant. By the time I made my decision, I was fully conversant of how currency is being traded. Once you know how it is being traded, then you can find ways of overcoming.

00:10:58

[Donna Cheng](#)

Societal leaders like yourself, have to be strong in a lot of ways. You have to make decisions that sometimes isn't popular, or sometimes may offend others. How... what is the quality, or the trait that leaders like yourself need to have to do such, to take such action?

00:11:18

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

I think experience counts for a lot, and knowledge, direct knowledge. For example, I had visited many countries before, even before I became prime minister. I notice what other countries are doing, how they are developing. In fact, we even adopted a slogan, "Look East", because we thought that Japan would provide a good model. Korea would provide a good model. So, we learn from them, and once we are knowledgeable about how things are done, and how they can be made to contribute towards the development of the country, then it is a matter of adopting their methods, but with modifications to meet the situation of the country.

00:12:15

[Donna Cheng](#)

For yourself, what would... qualities, your personal qualities that you think are critical? Maybe give me three, that have seen you through your leadership years?

00:12:27

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

As I told you, I don't run away from problems. I confront problem, and I try to understand the problem. So that is what enabled me to face many, many crises during my time, and overcome them, and at the same time of course, remain popular enough to win five elections.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Five elections, that's really something. What kept you going? It was your family? How was your family like in supporting you in your journey?

00:13:03

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Actually, my family has nothing to do with what I was doing. I don't even tell them. I don't even tell my wife when I was going to step down. I believe that my job cannot involve my family. I actually did not allow my children to be involved in politics, at the time when I was Prime Minister, for fear of being accused of nepotism. So, I was

basically on my own. If at all I have some friends, who are knowledgeable about things, and I talk to them, discuss with them. Also, I can have a debate within the cabinet. There were times when they rejected my solution, but that was fine. They gave their reasons for that, and I accepted their reasons. But I mean... you have a duty to help develop the country, and you have to take that not lightly. You will take that as a big responsibility, because if you fail, then forever people will be condemning you. I don't want to fail, I want to leave some good things for people to remember.

00:14:36

[Donna Cheng](#)

Were there points where you felt tired? You were a doctor, you could have a comfortable career, and a comfortable life. Were there ever points where you just felt, enough?

00:14:49

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

No. I don't really, I can't really tell you when I have felt it was enough. I actually enjoyed solving problem, because I was trained as a doctor. For a doctor, diagnosing the disease that the patient has, is a challenge. When you are able to identify the disease, and prescribe the medicine, or the surgery that is needed, you feel very satisfied. It is a kind of job satisfaction as a doctor, and as a politician. Whenever I find a solution, it gives me a boost. It gives me a very strong... I feel actually happy.

00:15:38

[Donna Cheng](#)

Energized and rejuvenated for the next for the next step, right?

You said you tried to keep your family out of politics, you didn't allow them to have a career in politics. But your daughter, Marina, we interviewed her on our show as well, on our programme. She is highly respected, for her work in the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), and as a writer. What kind of a father were you like to Marina?

00:16:03

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Marina has her own mind. She doesn't always support me. She sometimes become very friendly with the Opposition, with the NGOs, which are critical of the government. I had

no choice, except to accept that that is her way of doing things. She's not subject to my influence, or control. She does thing on her own. If she is popular, good for her. But sometimes of course her popularity maybe at my expense.

00:16:45

[Donna Cheng](#)

But as a dad, how did you raise her? Do you think it's possible to raise a leader?

00:16:51

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

But I raise her in the usual Asian Malay way of raising children, to be obedient to the parents, etcetera. To have, to understand values good and bad. But there was one instance, when she went to America to stay there for three months with a friend, an exchange student, who came to live with us. After coming back, she was completely changed, because in America she was exposed to American values where you exert your personality. You are not under control of anybody, including your parents. So, she became very independent after that. As a result, of course she did not always support me.

00:17:48

[Donna Cheng](#)

How do you deal with that, as a dad?

00:17:50

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Sometimes it's irritating. Sometimes I feel sad. But there's nothing I could do about it.

00:18:00

[Donna Cheng](#)

You come across as a very rational person. I love your analogy of a doctor, and I really see how you see the parallels with your job as a politician. As a politician, you have helped bring Malaysia through many difficult periods. I'd like to widen that, your role as a leader, as a part of ASEAN, right? Because Malaysia has been strong in the first five-member states of ASEAN as well.

00:18:33

[Donna Cheng](#)

What do you see are the strengths, and the weaknesses of ASEAN, from the time you were a part of it, as a leader that was highly involved, and what it has become right now?

00:18:49

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

In the first place, many people misunderstand ASEAN. ASEAN was not set up, because of the need for economic cooperation. It is not like European Union, which is based on economic cooperation. ASEAN was set up to avoid conflicts and wars between ASEAN countries. We were having problem between Malaysia and Indonesia and the Philippines. So, we thought that if we have a grouping, where the leaders can meet, then they can avoid war, but resolve problem around the table. So that was the basis for the formation of ASEAN. But at that time, leaders tend to stay in power for a longer time. We have people like Suharto, Kuan Yew, and even myself. We know each other very well. It's not a question of leader of a country, it's just friends, who know each other. It became much easier for us to resolve problems between us. However, there were economic cooperation came later. When we see Europe having that kind of economic cooperation, we thought that why not ASEAN. We thought that we could set up industries in each other's country, owned by all the ASEAN countries. We identified heavy industries for each of five ASEAN country, except in Singapore. But unfortunately, the countries, ASEAN partners, did not invest in each other. So even though Malaysia set up a fertilizer plant in Malaysia, which should be owned partly by the other ASEAN countries, the other ASEAN countries did not come in. From then on, economic cooperation becomes difficult to manage. Difficult to come up with a good formula. Eventually of course, we had the ASEAN Free Trade Area. But that too is difficult, because on the one hand, we are competing with each other, on the hand, the level of development of the ASEAN countries is not the same. Some are very undeveloped. Some are, almost like Singapore for example, is practically a developed country. So, cooperation between countries that are of different levels of economic prosperity is quite difficult.

00:21:45

[Donna Cheng](#)

So that the concept of narrowing the development gap, that was something that came up during your time as well. Take us through the thinking for that, and how do you think that has worked, or hampered development in the region?

00:22:02

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Because we cannot compete with each other. It's not an equal competition among equals. We thought that the weaker nations should be given time, should be protected. So, when we had the ASEAN Free Trade Area, we provide protection for the least developed country, so that the products of the developed country do not enter the market of the weaker countries so easily. At the same time, we try to facilitate the development of the weaker countries by encouraging investments and exposing them to ways of developing their countries.

00:22:48

[Donna Cheng](#)

How do you think that has worked?

00:22:50

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Politically for example, we find that Myanmar, was not being democratic. It was military... operate the country, ruled by the military junta. But we brought the military leaders to the other ASEAN countries, to show that the economy, democracy does not, will not be bad for them. It will be good even for the junta. Because of that, I think eventually they decided that they should become democratic.

00:23:36

[Donna Cheng](#)

But ASEAN also has this... maintained a non-intervention policy, right? A consensus before moving forward. Every nation runs, every state runs the way it feels it should. Do you think this is still relevant, and still the way to go for ASEAN?

00:23:53

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Yes, we feel that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of a country, which is a very good principle. On the other hand, when we see something very wrong happening in that country, not to try to do something would be very bad. We have the case of Cambodia under Pol Pot. When this man was slaughtering two million of their people, the whole world just ignored them, and allowed Pol Pot to tyrannise the whole

country. I think in that situation, countries should interfere, should intervene, and try to put a stop to excessive abuses of power that you see. So, while we believe that there should be non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, but there must be a limit to that. If you see the country killing its own people, depriving them of their rights, and maybe arresting them, detaining them, and all that, I think we should at least try to do something to stop that.

00:25:04

[Donna Cheng](#)

How was that handled at that time? You have this policy to say, "Let's not do that, let's not meddle in internal..." Yet, from a human point of view, you need to, right? You can't see someone doing something, and not step in. How do you... leaders like yourself, navigate that situation?

00:25:24

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

One of the countries that was undemocratic, ruled by military junta, was Myanmar. So, we decided that Myanmar should be a member of ASEAN, so that we can have some influence over Myanmar, and its internal affairs. But we want to do it diplomatically. So what we did was to invite leaders of Myanmar to visit our countries. To show that a democracy is not something bad. It's something that will not cause them to lose their influence, or their power over their country. All they need to do is to be much more popular. So, in a very subtle and friendly way, we tried to influence their thinking about the situation prevailing in their country and about how they can actually develop their country.

00:26:27

[Donna Cheng](#)

You talked about leaders previously where all of you... have been leaders like say, for a longer period of time, so you become like friends. Right now, the situation is different. Changes are more a constant, even in leadership. Would you see that as a challenge for ASEAN?

00:26:47

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Yes, that is a challenge. You see, when you get to know somebody closely, then it's easier to interact. But when you go to the next meeting, and you meet a different face, and you

don't know what the person is like, it makes it a little more difficult for you to get along with the person. You need time to know him, to know his character, his likes and dislike. To that extent, relationship within ASEAN countries today is a little bit more brittle; more prone to disagreement than before, when the leaders stayed in power for a longer time.

00:27:37

[Donna Cheng](#)

Speaking from experience, how should leaders today handle such brittle relationships? Given how quickly things move, and the shortage of time to develop a relationship. Speaking from experience, how should leaders move today?

00:27:57

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Of course, most countries are worried if their leaders stay on for too long. So, they tend to limit the period that the leader can stay in power. But the period should not be too short. Maybe it should not be one term, it should be at least two terms, so that he has enough time to learn about things, to handle things, to come up with policies, and to implement the policies. So that is one thing that each country can do: lengthen the time. At the same time, if the leader fails, then there must be means of shortening the period that he is in power. Because sometimes leaders can do very bad things. So, you find a need to stop, shorten this period. There must be provision in the constitution for the leader to be indicted or charged with whatever wrongs that he has done. That part, I think leaders should develop personal relation. This is done by bilateral meetings. We have bilateral meetings with Indonesia largely, and with other countries. So that on those occasion, you really get to know, to interact with each other. That will build up understanding and friendship.

00:29:33

[Donna Cheng](#)

Truly, it is through more dialogue and more conversations, and sometimes even if it's informal, right, to build that relationship. ASEAN goes into fifty years next year, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. What is your hope for ASEAN, moving forward?

00:29:50

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

In terms of regional organisation, ASEAN is perhaps the most successful. There have been other regional organisation, especially of developing countries. But they have not been able to attain much success. ASEAN's achievement of course is that, we are not confronting each other. We are not at war with each other, and we are able to meet regularly in a situation of stability and peace. That is actually very good. We have learned a lot about how to interact with our neighbours. I think the ASEAN in the future should, could even be a kind of model for other countries. Certainly, in the resolution of conflicts between nation, we are a model. For example, in the overlapping claims on land, we have resolved that through peaceful mean, no confrontation, in: Malaysia with Indonesia, Malaysia with Singapore, Malaysia with Thailand, Malaysia with Brunei. All these overlapping claims have been resolved through peaceful negotiation, or through a court of law. That should be the way for most countries. While ASEAN is not a very powerful grouping, yet it is a stability. It's something that we can be proud of and can contribute towards its being a great market with 600 million people. Also, it would be a place where people should invest in, because of the stability, and the fact that we don't change policies radically within short periods.

00:32:02

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, you don't think ASEAN needs to evolve, or needs to change, because times are changing?

00:32:07

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

We should take into consideration the fact that the East is obviously overtaking, and maybe going to be ahead of the West in many ways. So, ASEAN will have to play a role in international affairs, and provide, give its opinions, its views on international affairs. For example, when we have this Trans-Pacific Partnership idea, ASEAN did not have a common stand. We have a different... ASEAN countries accepting or rejecting the TPPA (Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement). But I think there is a greater need for coordination between the ASEAN countries when handling international affairs.

00:33:06

[Donna Cheng](#)

You're hopeful for ASEAN, for the next fifty years and beyond?

00:33:10

[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

Depends upon the leadership. The performance of any country, or any group of countries, is very dependent upon the leaders that they have. I do hope that the leaders of ASEAN in the future carry the principles, the understanding that led to the formation of ASEAN. That is to say, we must never, ever have confrontation with, between us, and certainly not violent confrontation. Instead we should use peaceful methods of solving conflicts between our nations, also, we should play a bigger role in international affairs.

00:33:58

[Donna Cheng](#)

Thank you so much Dr Mahathir for your time and for your insights. You're on Digital Narratives of Asia.

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[Mahathir bin Mohamad](#)

You're welcome.

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