

Citation on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad: Gordon Arthur Ransome Orator 1996

1. Your Excellency Mr Goh Chok Tong Our Prime Minister
2. Yang Amat Berbahagia Datin Paduka Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah binti Haji Mohd Ali
3. Brigadier General George Yeo Minister of Health and Minister of Information and The Arts
4. Dr Aline Wong Senior Minister of State Health and Education
5. Yang Berhormat Tan Sri Dr Wong Soon Kai Deputy Chief Minister Sarawak and Yang Berbahagia Puan Sri Datin Paduka Dr Yong Sau Kan
6. Yang Berhormat Tan Sri Datuk Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman, President of the 30th Singapore-Malaysia Congress and Master of the Academy of Medicine Malaysia
7. Dr Tan Ser Kiat Master of the Academy of Medicine Singapore
8. The Honourable Dr CH Leong, Vice President Hong Kong Academy of Medicine
9. Visiting Presidents and Representatives of Overseas Colleges
10. Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am not going to bore you with the mundane facts of Dr Mahathir's political career, and what he has as Prime Minister for the last 15 years accomplished for his country and its peoples. But as an intimate friend I'd rather tell you some of the less well known facts about him, so that you will understand what makes this enigma of a man tick. And why he is what he is today.

He was born to a humble family; the last of the seven children of a school teacher, Mohamad Iskander, who became the founder Principal of the Sultan Abdul Hamid College Alor Star. From where Mahathir himself finished his secondary education. Like all the other great Southeast Asian leaders, his political awakening occurred during the Japanese occupation. As early as his teens, he was imbued with the all-consuming desire, not only to rid his country of British colonialism, but more importantly, to uplift the lot of the downtrodden indigenous Malays. His entrepreneurship for survival during the Japanese occupation, you would have read in the papers recently. His culinary expertise also acquired then is known only to a few.

Came the end of the war, priorities had to be set. So it was back to school to complete his studies after a four-year break. Then the long wait of three to four months for the results from Cambridge. While the rest of us felt we needed a well-earned holiday, the political fire which was always smouldering was rekindled in young Mahathir. He wasted no time and played an active role as a member of the first Malay political party in Kedah-SABERKAS. However, politics had to take a back seat, for the next priority rightly was a tertiary education. Now the activities of this young political agitator did not go unnoticed by the authorities. The veracity of what I am going to say next, I cannot vouch for; but it was said that the colonial office in London gave strict instructions to the British military administration that young Mahathir should on no account be allowed to proceed overseas to pursue a legal or political course. The local authorities decided that the best way to achieve this was to order the selection committee to give him a place in the medical school. Not only did they do this, but to make doubly sure they gave him a Federal bursary to boot. Thus young Mahathir entered the portals of the King Edward VII College of Medicine in October 1947; only to find to his bewilderment, that the path to becoming a doctor was strewn with many preliminary dangers lurking in every nook and corner. I see some of them in the audience today, some 50 years later. Anyway, once settled in College, many were the soap-box orations on politics along the corridors of Tan Tock Seng Hostel and later the hostel known as The Stables. And heated were the debates between him and other aspiring politicians who had taken up medicine. This was the time of the proposed Malayan Union and the question of having a Malay Assistant High Commissioner; the definition of Malaysians; and the question of who were the real indigenous people. Ironically, one of his chief opponents of these debates became a member of parliament and a Minister of the Malaysian cabinet before him and at the time when Mahathir himself was in political exile, having been expelled from UMNO. In our third year, quite a number of the class of 47 were arrested and some jailed for anti-British activities (I see a very senior member of the Sarawak cabinet smiling to himself at the memory). But Mahathir was not one of them. He always went by the book and stuck to rules; and he still does.

Now for another aspect of young Mahathir. A Federal bursary in those days meant, all found, and an allowance of \$25.00 a month. Some unnamed rat squealed to the warden that many of the bursary holders were receiving funds from home. All were called up. Some blatantly lied, some admitted to receiving \$5 and some \$10. But young Mahathir being honest (rather than naive) confessed to receiving \$15 and had his allowance promptly cut to \$10. Hence, to augment his finances he took to writing a regular column in the Straits Times using the pen name-CHEDET. The

topics were wide and varied, but mostly centered on the lot of his impoverished people and their problems. “Malay padi planters need help”, “Malay progress and the University”, “Plight of the fisher folks”, “New thoughts on nationality”, “Changing Malay marriage customs”—just to name a few. So well were these articles thought out, and written, that the chief Editor of the Straits Times offered him a full time job as a correspondent. Had he accepted it, Malaysia’s history may have been different. As a matter of fact, he has implemented, or he is trying to accomplish all these objectives he then wrote about. (However, there is one he will never be able to change, namely the Malay marriage customs, for he will have to contend not only with the Malays but also the Hindus.)

Came the third year, he was alas afflicted with a certain common condition of the heart and he added a new subject to his already overloaded medical curriculum—*pak-toh-logy* as we call it and as you can guess it hasn’t the usual Greek or Latin derivation. But comes from the good old Cantonese. It was probably one of the most important of the subjects he took up. The lady in question has been his constant companion, and has stood by him at every turn, through thick and thin. At some press conference, a cheeky correspondent once asked Datin Hasmah whether she was the driving force behind Mahathir and his achievements, her reply—“my husband is one person who does not need a driving force, nor is he influenced by anyone”. As to her role as a wife, “it is always said that behind every successful man there is a woman, but I say not just any woman but his loyal wife”. (Hasmah, I would only like to change the “behind” to ‘beside’.)

After his housemanship he was posted as Medical Officer to Pulau Langkawi, (I was under the impression that it was for a year or more and was going to blame the British again—calling it his “isle of Elba”) but Datin Hasmah assures me that he was there only for six months, before their marriage. So although he has always been wanting to change the Malay marriage customs, he himself I think is an ultra conservative and I suppose this was a sort of forced isolation of the bridegroom after the AKAD NIKAH and before the BERSANDING. Anyway, during his posting there, he grew to love the island and its people, mainly fisher folk. And he saw the great potential it had to becoming a leading island resort. And now you, especially the Malaysians, will understand his great penchant for Langkawi and his frequent visits there, whenever he can find the time, to see for himself that all the projects are taking proper shape and running smoothly (I wouldn’t be surprised if he has just flown in straight from Langkawi.).

As a general practitioner, he was greatly loved by the people of Alor Star and its neighbouring villages and kampongs. His wife and he not only practised humanitarian medicine but while others played golf or relaxed in some other way after work, they spent their spare time doing social work amongst the poor. We did not take a Hippocratic oath in those days. But as Hippocrates himself said “wherever the art of medicine is learnt (may I add truly learnt), there is also love of humanity”.

What he has achieved as Prime Minister is not something I can go into nor do I need to. To become the President of the very party which expelled him (on 24 May 1969) shows his gumption, tenacity, perseverance and his commitment to his life’s work as he saw it even as a teenager. The worldwide accolades and honours bear testimony to the esteem in which he is held by all in general; the third world countries especially, and the Muslim world in particular. Always the champion of the underdog and downtrodden, he was almost the sole voice for the plight of the Bosnian Muslims. He is not just a man with a vision, but one with a clear vision of what he wants to achieve. His ability to forgive and give yet another chance; to see the goodness in a person rather than his faults; even in an enemy, shows his greatness. His argument has always been “no man is perfect”.

At the last count he had forty plus decorations and titles, none of which he uses. And when asked at an Islamic Conference how he was to be addressed, he said, “just call me doctor”. This I bring up not just to show his humility and modesty, but also his loyalty to his chosen profession. If one considers all these early dreams of his, and weigh them against what he has already achieved, he may not think so, but as far as I can see, he has more than fulfilled his destiny.

It is only befitting that as one of the early distinguished graduates of the then University of Malaya, he be honoured now with the Fellowship of the Academy of Medicine. Now as to the Sir Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration, he is also a most appropriate person to give it, if only to make amends for the fact that he, like most of us, skipped most of Professor Ransome’s formal lectures. They were too historical, too profound, too philosophical, and too early in the morning. But never, never did we miss a single of his bedside clinical teaching sessions. Professor Ransome would have been proud of this day.

Mr Master, Sir, I present to you Yang Amat Berhormat Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, as a most worthy recipient of the honorary Fellowship of our Academy.

Dr J J Murugasu

Academy of Medicine, Singapore

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