

The Singapore Years and Subsequently

M Mahathir,¹*FAMS (Honorary), LMS*

Abstract

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was a medical student at the King Edward VII College of Medicine from 1947 to 1953. He described his student days with fondness; he made many friends while he was at the College. He recounted his early days as a doctor before he entered politics in 1964. He became the fourth and longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years from 1981 to 2003. He concluded “The contribution of my Medical College days in Singapore to the racial harmony, peace and prosperity of Malaysia is tangible but unquantifiable.” [The Editors]

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As a small-town upcountry Malay boy, Singapore was to me a great big city when I first arrived in 1947 to join the King Edward VII Medical College. The tallest building was the Cathay Building, a full 13-storey high. It housed the Cathay Cinema and belonged to the enormously rich Chinese millionaire, Loke Wan Tho.

Together with a senior dental student from my home town of Alor Star who had fetched me from the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, I went through the huge Singapore General Hospital to the multi-columned pseudo-Greek edifice which was the imposing Medical College building.

I cannot recollect much of what happened in those hectic first few days but I remember being allocated a room together with two second-year students in Tan Tock Seng Hostel near Balestiar Village. Ragging was still in fashion then and I was told by one of the seniors that if I made any noise while sleeping, he was going to tub me. I remember waking up stiff and aching in the morning in exactly the same position I laid down when going to bed. I considered my treatment very decent, unlike the brutal ragging of today.

A military truck driven by a colourful character known as “Goucho” took the “freshies” to the hostel. He was not a Latino but a Chinese and we became familiar with his style of driving and his language. There were very few motor vehicles in Singapore in those days, but Goucho’s truck took us on hair-raising rides from Tan Tock Seng to the lecture rooms in Sepoy Lines (where the Medical College was) and also to Raffles College for our Chemistry lectures, without fail.

This was all before independence and Singapore became squeaky clean. Chinatown was a real Chinatown and was characterised by dilapidated Chinese shop-houses with bamboo poles stuck out of the windows of the first and second floors, displaying the washings of the day. The streets were dirty and there were hawkers everywhere. It was noisy and smelly. The five-foot ways were obstructed by hawkers and negotiating the five-foot-ways required some agility.

Lorries came and went, bringing goods and perishables to the shops and the rather unsanitary wet market. They blocked the roads but there were not too many cars to be obstructed.

Public transport was provided by the buses of the Singapore Traction Company owned by the British. The fare was very low. A few Chinese bus companies operated in the outskirts of the city. The colonial character of Singapore was obvious. In Fullerton Building, where the General Post Office was housed, there was still a notice showing the entrance for “Dogs and Asiatics”.

Marine Parade was the best place for fried tofu and weekends would find many students making their way there. We only saw the inside of the Adelphi Hotel when there was a very special occasion. Otherwise, our dances were held at Harrower Hall in the grounds of the College.

I found myself a member of the Malay minority of seven in the 1947 student batch of 77. It was very disheartening especially as I had only 3As while the non-Malay students all had 6As and above. I suppose the British Colonials were

¹Fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003

practising affirmative action without officially announcing it. There must have been many non-Malays with more “As” who were not admitted. But if not for this discrimination, I would probably not be able to make it as Prime Minister of Malaysia. However, I regained my self-esteem and the respect of my classmates when I topped the class in physics in the first-term examination. Coco Majeed and Syed Alhady who were in the fourth year when I joined were distinction kids in their batch. And so was Ezanee Merican who came one year after me. However, I never repeated my performance of the first term of the first year. Actually, it was possible for Malay students to be distinction kids.

I had never failed any examination in school and I continued to pass all my examinations in the College except my final in obstetrics and gynaecology (O & G). Professor Sheares was much taken up by the practice of obstetrics and gynecology in the US after his visit there and we were inculcated with the American way of treating Obstetric complications.

Unfortunately, he brought an external examiner from the UK, a Miss Gladys Dodds. During viva voce I gave the American treatment and I could see that she was not pleased. I failed in the viva and failed O & G. I managed to do well enough in Medicine and Surgery to gain exemptions. I had to do another 6 months of O & G before I qualified. I was quite angry because that failure broke my clean record.

The Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star where I studied was well-known for being good in rugby. Edgar Augustine who preceded me to College was in the College team. Naturally I was drafted into the Rugby Team, and even made it to the Singapore All Blues as a reserve. But I never played in competitive matches. I had never been good at sports and had played only rugby at school. And that was only because I was always ready to get hurt.

Before going to Medical College I was already active in politics, leading a group of Malay students against the Malayan Union proposal of the British. At the Medical College I joined the Muslim Students Society and became its President for one year. We were concerned about the performance of Muslim students and with the help of Mr Namazie, a Singapore philanthropist, raised money for tuition. Together with the other Malay boys in the class, I attended tuition under Mr Hon at his house somewhere in Geylang. He was later active in PAP politics.

There was a great deal of rivalry between the Medical College and Raffles College. But the Malay students being a small minority were more inclined to work together to improve academic performance with only occasional forays into Malay politics. Still, we followed closely the political goings-on in Malaya and once we went to Johor Bahru to see Tunku Abdul Rahman at the UMNO Headquarters

there. Tunku had just taken over UMNO from Dato Onn Jaafar.

Among the Malay student leaders, the most vocal and respected was Aminuddin Baki from Anderson School in Ipoh. He later rose to become the Director of Education at a very young age. He died in 1965. Poor man, medical science had yet to understand heart disease. It was a great loss to the Malay educationists community.

I had always been asked why I, as a doctor, should leave my profession to become a full-time politician. Actually, I was a politician who became a doctor. Politics was my first calling.

I was still too young, just a secondary school student when I became involved in politics and mixed with a lot of older people. The older people did not take me seriously and could not accept me as a leader. I decided that a university degree would gain me acceptance in their circle.

I wanted to study law, not because I had a liking for this profession, but because studying it involved going to the UK. In those days only the luckiest few got to go to England.

But I was offered a scholarship to study medicine in Singapore. I had no choice but to accept. You don't look a gift horse in the mouth during pre-independence days. And becoming a doctor did the trick – I was more acceptable as a leader.

The Government did not allow Government Officers to be involved in politics. So after four years as a Medical Officer, I resigned to start my own practice. As the first Malay private practitioner in Alor Star, I was quite successful. But I missed surgery, something that I was able to do while in Government service. In those days, an ordinary Medical Officer with no specialist qualification could do a lot of surgery. I had done abdominal surgery, hernias and leg amputation on my own, without the specialists being present.

When I told the “State Surgeon”, as the head of the State Medical Services was called in those days, that I was going to marry a doctor, I was immediately posted to Langkawi Islands. This was because there was only one Medical Officer post in Langkawi and after I married they would not be able to send me there along with my wife.

I started to grow beard a few days before sailing to Langkawi. Beards were not acceptable for Government employees. There would be too many embarrassing comments if I had tried to grow a beard in Alor Star. In a way I anticipated the hirsute fashion.

Langkawi was an experience. There was no jetty for the Government launch to come alongside. We had to get onto a sampan which brought us as near to the shore as possible. We then got off the sampan and waded through the mud. It

turned out that a jetty was built by Tunku Abdul Rahman when he was the District Officer. But when he was posted out of Langkawi, the sampan owners destroyed the jetty so they could once again earn money ferrying passengers. Langkawi was the Tunku's constituency after independence.

There were only two motor vehicles in Langkawi then – one belonging to the hospital and the other to the European Manager of Bukit Raya Estate. Langkawi then had no tourist to speak of and accommodation was rather primitive. I used well water and the hospital had a generator for night use only. No bottled water those days. Today, Langkawi has more than 20,000 cars and 7000 hotel rooms. It has come a long way.

In the course of my work I visited every nook and corner of the island. My mother's father was buried in Langkawi where he had served as a Magistrate.

I was struck by the natural beauty of Langkawi. Fortuitously, I became Prime Minister and I was able to do something for Langkawi's tourism industry. Today, Langkawi is almost as well-known as Bali.

In those days, the Langkawi hospital had no operating theatre; only an outpatient room. One morning I heard loud knockings on the door of my quarters. On opening the door I saw an old Chinese lady whom I knew well while working in Alor Star. Her son-in-law, the manager of Hai Huat Fishing Co., was having abdominal pain. He had been carried by two crew members in a sarong slung on a pole. I did a quick examination and found him to be having a strangulated hernia. I had the choice of sending him to Alor Star or to operate in Langkawi. I decided on the latter because the boat journey to Alor Star would take too long. I operated in the outpatient room, starting the anaesthesia with ethyl-chloride and ether and leaving the Hospital Assistant, Jo, to continue the anaesthesia while I operated. Today, no doctor would operate in Malaysia without a qualified anaesthetist.

The patient survived my operation. He died many years and dozens of salted fish (ikan talang) later. His widow still sends me salted fish. I also looked after her son who had a congenital heart condition for many years.

Today, Langkawi has a modern hospital capable of everything except the most complex of surgery. And Langkawi Airport is bigger than that in Alor Star, with International flights landing there.

As I said I was a politician who became a medical doctor. But that did not mean I regarded medical work as a drudge. I enjoyed the friendship of my patients. Mostly they were poor people from the kampongs. My fee as a private practitioner was RM3/- with RM2/- additional if I had to

give an injection. House visits cost RM5/- with no charge for the medicine. Many of the patients could not pay. Years later, when I was already a Prime Minister, some of them would timidly approach me during my official visits to Kedah to pay the RM5/- they owed me. Really, they were good paymasters.

I cannot remember increasing the charges until I ceased practising upon being appointed a Minister in the Federal Government in 1974. My income was slightly more than RM2000/per month. The strange thing was that when I took on an Indian (Gujarati) doctor as a partner, I still earned RM2000/- per month. My partner was a better manager and the cost of running Maha Klinik was reduced considerably.

I went into private practice in 1957, the year of Malaya's Independence. In 1964, I contested as an Alliance candidate in the Kota Star Selatan constituency and won. This meant having to be away from practice during Parliament sittings. Desperately I looked around for a partner. It was not so easy those days. Doctors preferred Government employment. But eventually I had Dr PP Shah. Later he left to start a clinic in Penang. He was a good partner and taught me a lot about managing business.

Dr Mohamad Yakob then joined me and finally took over the clinic when I was appointed a Minister. Dr Mohamad Yakob continued to pay me for the use of my clinic and the name "Maha Klinik" but has since stopped. I really should not be paid. He was very considerate.

The class of 1947 to which I belong is a very cohesive group. We still keep in touch although our members are diminishing rapidly. Whenever possible we would have a reunion. It is all very nostalgic; younger people, including our children, cannot understand these attempts to recapture the good old days. But I really have fond memories of my college days and even becoming Prime Minister cannot overcome my enjoyment of the good fellowship of my classmates.

I have served the country for 22 years as Prime Minister and 29 years altogether in the government. Time has flown very quickly. The days as a student in Singapore were happy days indeed. I made firm friends; Singaporeans and Malaysians, Malay, Chinese and Indians. The camaraderie of the student days influenced me very much. It helped me to accept the multi-racial character of Malaysia and enabled me to handle racial and religious issues. The contribution of my Medical College days in Singapore to the racial harmony, peace and prosperity of Malaysia is tangible but unquantifiable.