



By ANDREW SIA

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***A former minister shares eyebrow-rising inside stories from his long political career.***

UNLESS the name on the cover is Mahathir or Badawi, ministerial memoirs wouldn't usually be greeted with bated breath.

But the book by Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat that was released on Oct 12 has been causing quite a stir.

He was, after all, the person who controlled for more than a decade what the Malaysian public saw and heard on Government TV and radio channels as Information Minister from 1987 to 1999.

Now, aged 71 and suffering from diabetes and cancer, Tok Mat, as he is known, freely admits that his job was really as a Propaganda Minister.

In his political memoirs, *Umno: Akhir Sebuah Impian* (Umno: The End of a Dream), he explains how his ministry's campaigns, such as *Seti*  
*a* (Loyalty), were actually a response to the Team A versus Team B split in Umno in 1987.

"I had to bring Malay loyalty back to Umno. And I had to raise a presumption that anybody who

supported (Team B led by Tengku Razaleigh then) was not loyal. I went all out in this psychological warfare,” he writes.

“The Malays were numb to political arguments ... I needed something that penetrated the heart. I needed a song.”

So he wrote one himself: the famous *Setia* song with its supposedly patriotic lyrics (“*Demi negara yang tercinta*”, or “For our beloved country”, goes the first line) that was broadcast for years especially via the Government’s RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia) stations.

Tok Mat admits in his book that he first used Information Ministry staff in 1977 on a “mission” to topple the PAS State Government of Kelantan.

He reveals that later, in 1995, during the Sabah state elections, he sent 500 ministry staff members to “campaign for Umno” against PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah, which was controlling the state government then).

“The officers went to the ground,” he explains in fluent English at a recent interview.

“They rented rooms in villages, they slept and ate like the locals, they gathered information and persuaded the people. This silent propaganda works very well.”

Since government machinery is supposed to be neutral, I ask Tok Mat if he considers what he did an abuse of power.

He replies: “You could say I abused radio and TV, but it was a privilege I had. I could not depend on TV3, ( *The New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* or *Utusan Malaysia* because they were then controlled by Anwar Ibrahim’s boys. I had no choice but to use RTM.

“I was asked to bring PBS down. I shut the media off, there were no reports. People didn’t know what the Sabah Government was doing, so it looked like they were doing nothing. It was a very dirty tactic,” he now admits.

Tok Mat had his secondary school education at Johor Baru’s English College before doing a Bachelor of Arts at Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta.

He tells me that he learnt the basics of propaganda when he was a script writer for Film Negara (the National Film Board) in the mid 1960s. “There was no TV then, so that was the Government’s only (way to generate) propaganda,” he recalls.

He honed his innate musical ability there and picked up film editing skills too. He later went on to personally devise the melody and lyrics of various songs, including *Setia*, *Syukur* and *Sejahtera Malaysia*, that were used for his “nation-building” campaigns.

Tok Mat has always had a fondness for oldies by Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby, and once even made it to the quarter finals of Radio Singapore’s talentime singing contest in the 1950s.

“Tan Sri can sing and he can play the piano by ear,” chips in his wife, Puan Sri Salbiah A. Hamid, who is also at the interview. “And he can write. I still keep all his love letters from when we met as teenagers,” she smiles.

With these skills, Tok Mat became the chief loyalist and cheerleader for then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whose political rivals included Musa Hitam, Tengku Razaleigh and, later, Anwar.

He claims that most Umno people were hedging their bets then: “Everybody was half leg here, half leg there, very few were working (100%) for Dr Mahathir. I was totally devoted to him.”

But then again, he has a chapter in his book that declares *I Am Not a Yes Man*. In it, he cites how the developers of the Second Link to Singapore, who were Dr Mahathir’s “friends”, were trying to acquire the land of villagers in his constituency at 80 sen per sq ft (psf) so they could resell it at RM17.80 psf! He claims that he spoke up despite Dr Mahathir’s anger with him, and helped the villagers secure a better deal.

When the *Setia* campaign was not sufficient to bring back Malay support to Umno, Tok Mat says his ministry then launched the *Semarak* campaign in 1988, during which Dr Mahathir had massive “meet the people” sessions.

“I told the police chief,” says Tok Mat, “I don’t want to see any police uniforms around Mahathir, because that looks like we live in a police state. Instead, I gave the policemen *Setia* T-shirts to wear, so it looked like he was surrounded by the public.”

Tok Mat’s promotion of Dr Mahathir – who certainly had his critics, even in those days – indirectly made him “the most hated man in Malaysia”, he says.

In his book, he even acknowledges that people called him the “barking dog of the government”: “When the people hated Dr Mahathir, I became the face of the Government for them to hurl abuse at,” he writes.

But he took all this as a sign of “success” because it meant that he had managed to “penetrate

people's minds" to provoke anger: "In the art of propaganda, touching a nerve is very important," he explains.

Tok Mat claims that a sign of *Setia*'s success was that he has personally heard even non-Malays singing the song. As for the *Semarak* campaign, he says the crowds at Dr M's meet-the-people sessions ranged from 30,000 up to 100,000.

Were civil servants "pressured" into attending such events?

"No," he asserts, "nor did we provide transport or give out free T-shirts."

His "propaganda" might have been successful, but the Government still hired a PR and advertising firm during his tenure to advise on winning popular support. Now in hindsight, he is critical of the move.



“I think I was more effective because I understand the culture better. I had 1,000 officers working on the ground giving me feedback. Even Pak Lah (former PM Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) used these foreigners. But what results did these PR people get?”

Tok Mat's detractors say one of his career missteps took place in May 1999 when many Malays were angry at Umno over the Anwar Ibrahim saga.

Tok Mat alienated non-Malay voters (who were to play a crucial role in returning Barisan Nasional to power in the general elections later that year) with his infamous remark that Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, was “unfit” for leadership as she had been “educated in Singapore” and had “*darah cap naga*” (dragon brand blood), an euphemism for Chinese blood or lineage.

“No, it wasn't a mistake,” says Tok Mat now. “Because Anwar wanted Azizah to become Prime Minister. By the way, I am also cap naga. My mother is a Chinese (who was adopted by Malays). So I can talk. I can scold the Chinese and the Malays because I am one of them.”

Whether by coincidence or not, Tok Mat was relieved of his minister's post in May 1999 too. However, he writes that this was because "forked tongues" whispered to Dr Mahathir that he was a secret Anwar supporter.

"What I can't forget is the way Dr Mahathir dropped me without any *hati budi* (grace and gratitude)," he writes in the chapter entitled

*Habis Madu Sepah Dibuang*

(When the Sweetness is Finished, the Tasteless Part is Thrown Away).

Since then, he has become more critical of his former political master. For instance: "We know that Dr Mahathir blamed Pak Lah in all aspects even though the initial problems were caused by he himself. This is the 'expertise' of Dr Mahathir," writes Tok Mat sardonically.

Despite his rather caustic tone, Tok Mat says to me, "It may sound like it lah ... but I don't hate Dr Mahathir. I'm not angry with him. I still consider him a great leader of the country."

In fact, he leaps to Dr Mahathir's defence when I ask him about other controversial episodes when Dr M was PM.

However, he adds that money politics really became a “cancer” within Umno during Dr Mahathir’s era.

“In the old days, the corruption was smaller. If an Umno branch leader did not get a taxi permit, he would dissolve his branch. Now many Umno leaders are busy looking for big projects. That’s the success of the NEP (New Economic Policy),” he laughs.

More seriously, his book concludes, “Umno has jeopardised its image with power grabbing, money politics, bribery and excessive racism by certain leaders.... Umno must reform or I fear the *End of the Dream* (for the party) will really happen.”

*Picture / Raymond Ooi (The Star)*