

# Mahathir conferred honorary doctorate

It is in recognition of his outstanding leadership of Malaysia and other achievements

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A few hundred guests gathered at the NUS Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music yesterday to witness Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad receive an honorary doctorate in law from the National University of Singapore, but he still made time for a handful of old college friends from seven decades ago.

"Can we have a hug?" was the first thing former cardiologist Wong Hee Ong, 91, said when she met Tun Dr Mahathir. Like him, she is a member of the "Medicine Class of 1947", the cohort of 76 students who enrolled at the King Edward VII College of Medicine that year.

The college later became part of NUS, which yesterday conferred the doctorate on Dr Mahathir in recognition of his outstanding leadership of Malaysia and his enduring contributions to the longstanding bilateral relations between Singapore and Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir, 93, is on his first official visit to Singapore since emerging from 15 years of retirement to become prime minister again in May. He had previously served from 1981 to 2003.

"Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister and the world's most senior elected statesman returned to helm his country's government earlier this year in a stunning demonstration of his abiding love for Malaysia and his desire to enhance growth and prosperity for his countrymen. He is, in many eyes, a living example of bold leadership and steadfast resilience," Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean designate of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said in his citation.

Dr Wong attested to the formal compliments read out on stage.

She said that during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Dr Mahathir studied books on finance "day and night". "He is that way... He doesn't just say things without knowing. He will study it," she told *The Straits Times*.

One of his bold moves then was to



Singapore President and NUS Chancellor Halimah Yacob conferring the honorary doctorate in law on Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad at a ceremony at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music yesterday. Tun Dr Mahathir thanked the university for the "singular honour" in a brief address, and said: "I will value this honorary doctorate for as long as I live." ST PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN



Tun Dr Mahathir and his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, speaking with an old friend, Dr Sundrai Lily Sarma, after the ceremony.

ignore the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) recommendations for Malaysia to raise interest rates and trim public spending, and instead raise government spending and impose currency controls.

Critics and the IMF later acknowledged that Malaysia recovered from the crisis quicker than its South-east Asian neighbours due to these policies.

In a brief address after receiving his doctorate from Singapore President and NUS Chancellor Halimah Yacob, Dr Mahathir thanked the university for the "singular honour" and said: "I will value this honorary doctorate for as long as I live."

It was while at medical college from 1947 to 1953 that Dr Mahathir met his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah

Mohamad Ali, 92, who was given a distinguished alumni service award by NUS yesterday for her service in public health and for being an inspiring role model for women doctors in Malaysia.

"It all began, classmates say, when Tun Dr Mahathir became a frequent visitor to Holne Chase, the hostel for female students where Tun Dr Siti was staying," NUS president Tan Eng Chye said in his speech, to laughter from the 600-strong audience.

Dr Mahathir's interest in politics was evident during his college days, when he regularly contributed articles on Malay issues for *The Straits Times* under the pen name Che Det, a nickname he now uses for his blog.

He was a medical doctor in his home state of Kedah for several years after graduating, before being elected as an MP in 1964.

Known for his blunt manner and barbed remarks during his first stint as premier, there were concerns that Dr Mahathir's return to office would test relations between Singapore and Malaysia.

He tried to address those concerns yesterday.

"Singapore and Malaysia remain good neighbours," he said. "Yes, we do have problems, there may be some competition between us, but... we have been able to resolve these problems in a very peaceful way," he said.

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