

PAHIT MANIS

AHMAD
A TALIB

NEW VENTURE

AGRICULTURE — DAIM'S NEW LOVE!

He believes the sector has enormous potential

IN all my years as a journalist, I never had an opportunity to interview Tun Daim Zainuddin exclusively. Never had that one on one with the man widely regarded as one of the country's movers and shakers.

Daim as finance minister was not much of a talker (at interviews that is). But he would entertain questions at scheduled press conferences. He would choose and pick his occasions, including conferences and seminars.

But when Daim speaks, people listen. That's for sure.

I'm sure many people can easily recall the interview he gave to a Chinese newspaper two general elections ago. In that interview, Daim predicted that the Barisan Nasional would lose five states in the national polls. And he was proven correct!

But as luck would have it, I was presented with the opportunity for a one on one with him last week. I've covered Daim as a journalist before. He never failed to present himself as a serious person devoted to his own business, and later when he joined the government, as a financial guardian, planner and executioner of national fiscal and economic policies.

In the past one year or so, Daim has been in the news. That was when he was appointed as the chairman of the Council of Eminent Persons, an entity that was formed to help the newly-installed Pakatan Harapan government with socio-economic and financial matters.

Daim had said many times that he preferred to lead life as a private citizen. He was finance minister from 1984 to 1991, after which he left government service. It was then said that he had a falling-out with the then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His critics had a field day then. To show that the falling-out (if indeed there was one) was merely empty talk, Dr Mahathir brought Daim back into the cabinet in

1998 as minister of special functions, which the latter accepted.

Don't forget that 1997/98 was a difficult period for the country, with the financial crisis threatening to ruin us, politically and economically.

The naysayers had predicted that Malaysia would suffer and that its economy could not stand such pressure.

On the contrary, the country did very well actually, despite the financial crisis causing an overhang over the nation.

As minister with special functions, Daim set up the National Economic Action Council (NEAC), which tracked the economy daily.

Daim's approach was simple — identify the issues quickly and take immediate remedial actions.

You can say that the NEAC was a template, which was tried, tested and proven to be useful. Perhaps, it was a precursor to the Council of Eminent Persons, which Daim also chaired.

If you really had wanted to remain a private person, why come back to serve the government, I asked. His reply: "The prime minister called me to help him. How can I refuse?"

A straight-forward simple answer that speaks volumes of the former MP for Merbok's relationship with his former boss.

I had heard stories about Daim's latest love, which prompted me to seek the interview. I had seen a few postings on social media of Daim's visit to several places in the country, and none were related to finance or industrial.

They were visits to agricultural projects, run, managed and owned by individuals. Daim and agriculture?

He said: "Why not? If you take the trouble to go round the country, you will feel excited about agriculture. I've met new individuals who believe strongly in their efforts, who are passionate about their projects.

"I met a man by the name of Zul, who plants pineapple in Changlun in Kedah. Pineapple in Kedah? Most people think of Johor when pineapple is mentioned.



Tun Daim Zainuddin (left) sharing his views and thoughts on agriculture — a goldmine waiting to be fully developed.

"I met another person by the name of Marzuki who operates a small but very successful fig farm just outside Kuala Lumpur. In Kajang to be exact.

"And then, there's a Dr Yusof whose orchid farm in Dengkil is doing very well. These are the individuals who are making a name for themselves in the agriculture sector. I've also visited farms outside the country, too."

I'll be writing about these individuals, considering they had managed to trigger such big interest from Daim. Would you be helping the government in pushing for agriculture expansion then, I asked.

He said agriculture has such a big potential. It would be terribly wrong if we don't give agriculture a big push.

Thailand has made such big strides in agriculture, as has Vietnam, he said.

The people who are tasked with developing agriculture need all the support they can get. But they

must also be proactive in their research, especially in new technologies that can change our agricultural landscape.

"Do you know somewhere in the world, some farmers are experimenting with growing padi in the sea? I'm serious. If we want to reduce our over-dependence on imported foodstuff, we must be more aggressive with our agriculture," he said. By the way, our imported food bill is in excess of RM42 billion a year!

So if you have land to spare, I suggest you clear the bushes and start farming. Start with simple cash crops. Plant chillies, tomatoes, lemon grass, bananas and maybe rear chickens. Get a couple of goats since you are at it. Let's get started, folks!

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The writer is a former NST group editor. His first column appeared on Aug 27, 1995, as 'Kurang Manis'

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Selamat Hari Raya

IN a few days' time, Ramadan will leave us, to be replaced by Syawal. Hari Raya Puasa is just round the corner. This festive season will be no different from previous ones. But spare a

thought for those who are no longer with us. Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri, everyone, *maaf zahir batin*. I promise to be a better person next year. I wish all the best to all of you, too.