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### Marina Mahathir [Malaysia, Activist]

Marina Mahathir

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Interviewee: **MARINA MAHATHIR**

Interviewer: Kirpal Singh

Date: 2 February 2016

Location: Kuala Lumpur

0:00:21

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Marina, you obviously grew up in a very, very exciting family. How would you describe your own childhood?

0:00:30

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Actually I... My childhood was very normal, and pretty happy. People are under the impression that I grew up as the Prime Minister's daughter, but that makes me a lot younger than they think I am. I actually grew up as... just an ordinary small-town doctor's daughter in Alor Setar, because he didn't become Prime Minister until I was in my twenties. It's pretty normal... home, school, everyday life in Alor Setar. So, I wouldn't say there was much pressure, or anything. Pressure perhaps only came from my parents to do well at school, and do well in exams, that sort of thing.

0:01:17

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How was schooling like?

0:01:19

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Schooling was great. I went to a convent school, St. Nicholas Convent, Alor Setar, which sadly does not exist anymore, and I was there for a long time. I was there from kindergarten, all the way until Form three. I had nuns who taught me. The principal was... secondary school principal was a Reverend Mother. Everything was in English. It was a very good school. There weren't very many Malay girls in that school, because in Alor Setar a lot of Malay parents were worried about going to a Catholic school, that sort of thing. But for my parents, it was the standard of education that mattered, and it was considered a very good girls' school. I was there for the longest time, yes.

0:02:17

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Do you think the years of schooling in an all-girls school, particularly a convent, influenced your women's sensibilities a lot?

0:02:25

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Not particularly... But I think it made me... much more used to being around people of different races and all that, and being used around Catholics and Christianity, and all that. I didn't have an isolated upbringing in that way, as some people do these days. It made my world view a lot more open, and to this day, when people worry about seeing crosses on buildings, and all that I say, I grew up with a cross up there, pictures of Jesus and Mary all over the school, and I'm still a Muslim.

0:03:03

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now having your 'A' levels in the UK (United Kingdom), and then going to the University of Sussex, did you feel that those what, five years maybe?

0:03:11

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes.

0:03:12

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Those five years served to moderate maybe some of the values, or some of the attitudes, or some of the beliefs that you have been brought up with?

0:03:21

[Marina Mahathir](#)

I don't know whether moderate would be the right word, but when I went there, and actually before I went to the UK, in that time when you finish your Form five exams, and then there's a long wait for your results, so my parents sent me to the US (United States), to stay with a family that we were very close to, because their daughter had been an AFS (American Field Service) student, and lived with us for three months in the summer. The parents got on very well, so my dad really believes in travel as education and mind opening and all that, so sent me off to stay with the Hessers in California for three months. It was meant to be two months, and I extended it for another month. In some ways, that was, he now thinks that it was a mistake, because he thinks I came back quite different. But I don't think so particularly, but it was... to go from Alor Setar to Los Angeles, that's quite a big leap.

0:04:40

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Quite a big leap, huh?

0:04:41

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes, in culture, and I was sixteen, seventeen, something like that, and went to high school. It was really, really... eye opening realising that people were different. Before I went, my father sat me down and said, "Okay you're going there, very nice people but they are, different from us in many ways, culturally different, and things like that. So, you must always remember where you came from, who you are", and all that. I said, "Yes, yes." Not quite understanding what he meant. But I went there, and we got on very well, because the family had a lot of daughters, and one of them was almost exactly my age. At school, I found that it was kind of hard to penetrate the American social circles there, so I found myself always with the other foreign kids in the library. It was very hard to get through to the American kids. They just couldn't be bothered basically. They were not curious and... when I went to the classes, I found that I actually knew a lot more than these kids, especially general knowledge. Things like what is Number Ten Downing Street, no one had a clue. I, of course knew it. That was kind of like... what sort of education? This is supposed to be a more advanced country.

So, yes... it was this... it took a while to adapt to this. I guess I don't know what exactly my dad found different. I certainly came back much bigger than when I went, I noticed that. When I went to the UK, again that's a different culture already. So basically, I found that when you go to an alien place, you suddenly have to really look at who you are, and start defining yourself, which you never had to do before at home because everyone's the same. But when you go there, suddenly you start thinking, am I Asian? Why are there these differences, and which do I want to stick to? Things like money, for instance, we don't talk about money, and they all do. That's very awkward for us, and so, really trying to think am I going to be like that, and adapt here, or remain as I am, and as I am means what? So those were really defining times for me in trying to decide who I was. I don't think I would have had that sort of reflective time if I had stayed here, because everyone was more or less the same.

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[Kirpal Singh](#)

What are your views about censorship, in terms of say, academic censorship?

0:08:00

[Marina Mahathir](#)

To me it's really like shooting yourself in the foot. As it is, even before you censor anything, there's so much self-censorship going on. The topics that academics here choose to research are either kind of esoteric in some ways, but there are a lot of issues here which require research, which they're not even touching. For instance, you know we have a huge drug problem in this country, but there is actually very little local research on it, on why people get into it, for instance, so that we can devise solutions to the issues. I find it really wanting when I was working in HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus), there were so many areas of possible research that was necessary but...

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[Kirpal Singh](#)

So why do you think is that?

0:08:56

[Marina Mahathir](#)

I think partly... it's not... the focus nowadays is really on business and entrepreneurship, and finding things to invent that could be marketable, etcetera. There's very little social science research, which is a pity because there's so much that could be done. We have so many issues, which we're not tackling.

0:09:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Do you think part of the problem, the larger problem is a lack of real educational leadership?

0:09:33

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Oh absolutely. There is really quite poor leadership, because it is so politicised. As you know, the education system in Malaysia is so politicised. Everyone thinks that being Minister of Education is the best thing because it is seen as the stepping stone to premiership. It's like, okay, what can I do? You have all these teachers under you, and how can I use them to my advantage? That's all that it's about. It's not about the child, and how you can get them to achieve their best potential through education and try to find ways to upgrade... education. The ridiculous thing, like this constant fight between national schools and vernacular schools. Under the guise of promoting unity like, you have to have everyone in the same school in order that they'll get to know each other and be united. It's a nice thing in theory, but it's not even true. The national schools, the education standards are so low, everyone is abandoning it. What is left there is so... does not promote unity at all, there's so much, really, out and out racism in the schools, and so people either don't want it, and leave it, or if they're forced to stay, then they have to suffer under it. They keep attacking the vernacular schools as not contributing to unity, but in fact there are altogether about eight different types of schooling that our kids can go through. International schools, private schools, religious schools, home-schooling, etcetera, and nobody's talking about those. It's... nobody's coming out to say, "Look... let's deal with this in the rational way and see how we can bring kids together. If you want the national school to be the place where all Malaysian kids grow up together, as we used to, then the only way to do it is to raise the quality of the education." Because parents, that's what they want for their kids: good education. If they bring back English, for instance, and they raise the standards, people will just come flocking back. That's it. But right now, no.

0:12:08

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Which brings me to the next question, so what in your view, makes for a good leader?

0:12:15

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Having a vision of where you want to go, first of all, you really need that. What do you want to do with this project called Malaysia, and you have to have the ideas? You need to listen to other people, it's important. You have to get input from everyone, but you cannot come as a blank slate. This is something I have learnt from leading my own organisation, that I can't come with this idea, "Okay, I'm going to listen to everyone, and take the best idea." I have to have some myself, otherwise, what's the point? I would just be a polling card, or something. That's one, the vision, having some ideas and... being decisive is important because you have to listen to everyone and that's important, but in the end, you have to make that decision. Being wishy-washy and all that just doesn't work. It keeps people nervous, and that's not what they want. Right now, that's the situation we're in. We don't know what direction we're going, and we don't know what's what, what anyone really thinks of anything, there's no real proper framework that our leadership is working in, other than... let's spend all this money, and make people like us that way. It's... yes.

0:13:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, they say that a leader, some people say, that a leader especially in a very plural society such as yours and mine, needs to be somebody who, while maybe being firm in the area that he or she has been brought up in, nurtured in, and believes in, has also at the same time be very fair to all the others. Which means there's the whole big question of being sensitive, understanding, and aware, right? In your own personal sort of journey, when you were invited to join the Board of Sisters of Islam, for example, did you deliberate for long in your mind? Did you seize the opportunity straight away? I'm just wondering because that would have made people who follow your blogs, well blogging those days was not so big, but followed your articles, your journalism, your other views, your speeches, would they have wondered for example, whether your moving onto that board would then influence you in terms of your outlook, your orientations as a societal leader?

0:15:05

[Marina Mahathir](#)

That's a very curious question, I never thought of it that way. To me, it was an evolution. I was working in HIV and... I became very concerned about women being infected. I realised that there were a lot of cultural and religious and traditional beliefs that influence the way people behave... or the way people refuse to change behaviour. I thought that it was particularly important in the area of women and HIV. Like how you protect women when they believe certain things about how they should be, and how they should behave, and how their relationship with the men in their lives work, that sort of thing. A lot of this were

influenced by what they thought of as religion. So that was my concern, and that's how I started a TV programme to talk more generally about women's rights, especially to the young, because I figured that you have to start early, and hopefully that they... with that sort of information, they would build that sense of self, the confidence, etcetera, to withstand this type of behaviours that could be potentially dangerous for them, especially in terms of health. So it was, to me, a very natural progression from that to being with Sisters. I knew Sisters was not an exclusive club that it... the work that they do impacts on a lot of people, because Muslim women in this country are the majority of the women in this country. I was in fact going to work for an organisation that has an impact on a lot of women, so to me it wasn't very exclusive. Then working with them, we realised that talking about this issue is so difficult in this very restricted space. So, we need to also push that space open, and that means talking about democracy, talking about freedom of speech, talking about freedom of expression. A lot of people now recognise that when we're doing the pushing of that space, to open that space for us to speak, it also opens it up for everyone else to speak. Our work is important, not just directly for Muslim women, but to everyone. As far as I have heard, nobody's ever begrudged... me working there.

0:17:49

[Kirpal Singh](#)

No, no, it's not about grudging, it's just about being concerned. How do you feel that impacted you personally? Has it made you more vulnerable? Has it made you stronger? Has it made you...?

0:18:01

[Marina Mahathir](#)

It's made me stronger, from the time working in HIV, one of the areas of concern was religion, right? Because of... the sort of stigma discrimination that people were... very moralistic approach... so obviously religion had to come into it. I started working with a lot of religious leaders to get them to help us with dealing with the sort of stigma, more positive stuff. I became much more interested in my own faith. Like most Muslims in this country, we all grow up with all the rituals, and all the different stages, we all know that. But we don't know anything in-depth about what the faith actually says in terms of ethics, and things like that. Working in HIV I had to do that, and I became very much more interested in the Koran, and things like that, and Sisters approach to it all is the same, like religion is important to women, so you cannot put it aside when you're doing your work trying to promote women's rights, and all that. A lot of the problems that women face come from, not just these beliefs, but also from laws and public policy that originate from religion, or what people interpret as religion. As a result, I have had to learn a lot more about what the Koran says, and everything. That's really made me appreciate much more the richness of the Koran in promoting equality, justice, women's rights actually. I feel that no matter what all these attacks are, I'm very confident talking about religion, because this is one of the things that the Sisters fought for; the right of everybody, including women, including Muslims and non-Muslims, to talk about religion.

0:20:27

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Since we're on the topic of religion, which is very sensitive and very touchy, many of us are curious about what you think of the rise of fundamentalist religious fervour in many different religions it's happening?

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[Marina Mahathir](#)

Well first of all, I think all these so-called fundamentalists movements, whether it's in Islam or Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, are all basically political movements. It's about power, it's about trying to get something, which you assume the other has. You can see that they always align with political parties and things like that, right? That's one. The other thing I think particularly about Islam... why this type of movement take root, is because the people who call themselves Muslims very often don't know their own religion. Very few of them, like I said most of us are brought up to know the rituals, but we don't know in-depth about the principles and the ethics that are being promoted by this religion. Everyone likes to say, "Oh it's perfect, it's a religion of peace" and all that, but you ask them to explain and they can't say. That's a basic problem because it means that anybody can come along and tell you something and you believe it. The guys who are promoting this type of very conservative, very traditional, very fundamentalist types of... number one, they're scary, you dare not say anything and then they're usually men who are in authoritative positions, they're quite scary. They're very forceful. You go along with it because it's easier. For people like us, we're challenging that a great deal. We're women, we're not necessarily covered, some of us are. We didn't go to the so-called great schools of Islamic scholarship, but we know our stuff. So, people find this confronting because we are not the image of the teachers that they are supposed to follow, right? It needs to be done because what we're dealing with is what we call the 'lived realities' of Muslims today, particularly women. Women are now out there, they're earning money, they're very often in higher positions than men. So, why should they accept things that were supposedly laid down in the sixth century, when circumstances were far different in every way? So that is the basic issue and it's a real struggle. You don't even have to talk about clash of civilisations between Islam and everyone else. Within us there are huge struggles going on, and I'm not sure that anyone outside really appreciates it, and... knows who to support. I'm totally fed up of the media, especially Western media, constantly promoting the angry bearded men. Featuring angry bearded men, all the women all covered up, and forgetting this whole swathe of people in between, who are actually the ones that are far more rational, far more... often far more educated, and who can build the bridges that we need to have.

0:24:26

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Some of the old books, they say, hand for a hand, eye for an eye, and all that, right? So, maybe your journalistic intensity should now come off even greater, right? [Laugh]



0:24:37

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes, maybe.

0:24:38

[Kirpal Singh](#)

To combat the media, I mean... another TV (Television) show!

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[Marina Mahathir](#)

Well, I tried... Yes, we tried different ways. Actually we have given up on TV, and we're now going online, because the censorship...

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[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now social media, right?

0:24:51

[Marina Mahathir](#)

... and this would be a nice segue into your thing, but the censorship is getting too much. So, digital is the only way to go.

0:25:00

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Talking about censorship, you had a couple of pieces censored, by The Star?

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[Marina Mahathir](#)

To be fair to The Star, and I always make sure I mention this, I have been writing to them, with them, for...

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[Kirpal Singh](#)

For decades, right?

0:25:12

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes, over twenty years. I have a lot of columns, and out of that only about six were actually censored. So, it's not bad when you look at the whole thing. Having said that, it's still annoying, of course, when the reasons they give sometimes are a bit silly, and you know why. The last two, the more recent ones, were always around election time. The ones where they felt I was a bit too obvious who I was referring to. I have some sympathy because I know that they get a lot of nasty phone calls from various people, not necessarily anyone official, yelling at them to say why did you allow this.... I can understand them getting fed up after a while. But in this day and age, actually censoring anything, there's no point. Because all I do is... I put it on Facebook, and that's it.

0:26:16

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What inspires you? What motivates you to do what you're doing, and where did it begin?

0:26:21

[Marina Mahathir](#)

[Laugh] That's really hard to... answer. I... I'm constantly energised by people I meet who are doing things. I always feel that there's always something that can be done to solve a problem, or something. I'm not one of those that accepts "No" for an answer, or "Cannot" I don't like the word "Cannot". I always say that something can be done, and it's just a matter of sitting down and tackling so. Sometimes it's being able to confront a problem and find a solution and it's workable. I find that inspiring. I guess it's a very practical form of motivation or inspiration, but I'm not... if I think of something that I feel needs to be done, I can sit on it for a while, and I'll constantly talk about it until I find the right match with someone who can do it. Then it happens, and then I get very excited. Because I have seen it happen many times, I don't get deterred very easily, I find that whole history inspires me, that things can be done.

0:27:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Here there's something that can be done, that for some people, needs to be done, and for many others, it should be done. They feel that you should aspire to be the first female Prime Minister of Malaysia. What do you think? [Laugh]

0:28:06

[Marina Mahathir](#)

I don't... well, I'm very practical on many levels. Number one, I think that entering politics requires a lot of stamina and energy, and I don't think I have that. It should be someone much younger. I don't think... I'm at the point where I keep thinking: I just want to lie back and do nothing, so that's one...

0:28:36

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But you can't just be a grandma, right? You're...

0:28:38

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Why not? Why not? [Both laugh]

0:28:42

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Secondly, on a more practical level, our system does not allow for it, simply does not allow for it. To be the Prime Minister in this country, you have to be the leader of the party with the most number of seats in parliament, which I am patently not. How would I even get there? You look at the Opposition... there are women there; it is theoretically possible. But they're so untogether as it is, they don't have the numbers etcetera, so I don't see that happening. There's no way I'm going to be head of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), ever, I don't think, especially given current circumstances.

0:29:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Given current context, yes.

0:29:26

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes, so... when people say that they're being very nice and all that but, looking at it practically, it just can't happen right now. Unless we have a total change of system, and we have direct elections like the US, or like Indonesia, then there's a chance. Then I might be interested. But right now, no, too many hoops to go through.

0:29:53

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Too many hoops... alright. What do you think of... looking back now that your father is elderly? Looking back, would you reflect on his leadership style?

0:30:08

[Marina Mahathir](#)

Yes, I do all the time, simply because there's so many points of contrast nowadays. Whatever anyone thinks about my dad, whether they agree or disagree with him, the one thing they'll agree on is that he's always decisive. He always knew what he wanted. He always laid out this path for us to follow, whether we like it or not. But we knew where we were going. We had Vision 2020, we had Look East, or whatever. We knew what he wanted, and all that.

That gave people a sense of security and stability, because we knew where we were heading. Nowadays, we don't have that. People feel like they're on a rocky boat, and that's not nice. They don't know where they're heading. So, it was... and I don't know. There are many, many different views of my dad. Sometimes, he is unfairly depicted. I find it very strange, for instance, that he gets blamed for a lot of the current racial position, or polarisation, because he's a very non-racial person. He stands up for his people, because he feels they're disadvantaged. I don't think he's very racial at all. He's also, when it comes to religion, very liberal. That's the way I was brought up. I know this for sure. I actually know someone who's written his PhD thesis on Islam under Mahathir government, and looked through all his speeches, and all that and no, he has an approach that is very confident, very liberal, very progressive, and that's why the Conservatives hate him. They do hate him. It's not, it's nowhere near the situation that it is now. He used to keep all these *ulamas* (scholars) in line, because he knew a lot about religion. He knows the Koran and all this. I don't think that is appreciated very much.

0:32:37

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What's your take on the current crisis of leadership here?

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[Marina Mahathir](#)

I think it's disastrous... like everyone else. I can't think of anyone who has a single nice thing to say. Unfortunately, we're heading... God knows where, with everything. Never mind the economy, but just our basic values seem to be turned upside down. Things that used to be considered good, is now bad. Truth-telling is no longer valued. People blatantly do things and expect us, or say things, and expect us to believe them. There is no credibility, no trust anymore.

0:33:27

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Is there a climate of fear, you think, that is... starting to envelop the writers, the journalists, the media?

0:33:34

[Marina Mahathir](#)

There is some, because of the laws that we have, and everything. People are a bit wary. I personally don't feel scared, and it's not because of the position I'm in because obviously I'm in... nowadays as precarious as anyone else. Both my colleague Zainah and I were talking about it in Penang, and she said that she's not scared. I think it's... we women, we are so used to constantly having to fight, even when times are good because for women's rights and all that... that for us, it's just more of the same. So, nothing really deters us, because we know that we have to keep on pushing. Because if we buckle, then that will be it. It is tough, for us,

for women, leadership is a tough job because you, especially if you're doing these difficult issues, you have to be there constantly, and people are constantly demanding. You have family that you also have to think about... their concerns, you have to face, you have to respect, and that's hard for all of us.

0:35:01

[Kirpal Singh](#)

On that note, thank you so much, yes.

0:35:03

[Marina Mahathir](#)

You're very welcome.