

Standing tall in the face of opposition

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PART ONE — on himself and his detractors; corruption; values and attitudes; rural perceptions.

How is it that you haven't aged one minute in the past five years?

(Laughs) Who said I haven't? I've got grey hair and I'm balding now.

Are you enjoying yourself?

Why shouldn't I be? How many people have the chance to enjoy the work of being a Prime Minister?

What does that involve?

It involves being able to do a lot of things which I have always wanted to do... help people improve themselves, help to make the country great.

You've always wanted to do this?

I've always wanted to stand as tall as other people.

Now you stand so much taller.

I don't think so.

Datuk, when you look back on these past five years, what are the satisfactions?

The ability to implement many things, to put ideas into practice, and to see those ideas achieve real results.

Of course, some of those ideas, especially those which involve behaviour, have not actually brought about the results which I yearn for, but those are things which take time.

Attitudes?

Attitudes, the value system. When we talk about *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah* or when we talk about discipline, industriousness, diligence; these involve the behaviour of people, and that's not so easy to bring about because people naturally resist changes that involve their own personal values. Yet, that discipline is the key to the whole problem.

I've tried to promote those values which I consider can make this country a great country, a developed country, a respected country, but lately I have had the rug pulled from under my feet by people creating a sense of doubt over my own credibility in trying to promote this. So things become a little more difficult.

Datuk, when you became Prime Minister, you did so much to kick this country onto its

feet; you really gave it that push it needed. In the 1982 elections, you got a lot of support amongst first-time voters, the young. Don't you think, though, that some of the doubts that are now being directed against you are the result of the maturity which has developed under your administration?

It is certainly the result of the attempt made to bring about this new sense of values.

For example, if you say you want to eradicate corruption, when you do it, you bring to the surface the problem, and when the problem surfaces, it paints a picture that is not so nice, and somehow or other that picture is made to appear the result of your own action.

You are saying that because you were responsible for making these negative things visible, you are now being held as having caused them?

Yes. Say, somebody tells you that there is corruption practised in the award of a tender. You feel that you should examine the allegation, and you examine it. You may not find solid evidence, but you feel a need to do something about it, and you do something about it. Then that action on your part leads to a suspicion that maybe you're doing it for yourself; that in fact you are taking for yourself the cut that is going to the other chap.

That makes it extremely difficult. What do you do when somebody complains that such-and-such a tender award has been influenced by some corrupt practice, and when you try to stop it, you are accused of trying to stop it because you want to give it to somebody else who has offered you something?

How do you cope with this?

You don't do anything. And then of course people will say look, this corruption is going on and he is not doing anything. And when you do something they say he's trying to take it for himself. The fact that there is no evidence, that you can't point to any evidence that would implicate me, doesn't seem to worry a lot of people. They say "Ah, but he must be keeping it somewhere. He must have a numbered account. He may have stashed it away under somebody else's name." All kinds of fantastic suggestions

are made, and people seem to enjoy believing them.

Does it disappoint you, make you feel betrayed?

It doesn't disappoint me, but it hampers my work. It makes it all the more difficult to keep people going along a straight path. When you are not allowed to correct people who are not following the right path, because you want to save yourself from accusations, then of course you can't achieve anything.

When you go out to the rakyat in the rural areas and see those people, how do you feel?

The contact, I think, is extremely important; so that you are not carried away by your own perceptions, your own imagination, your own ambitions for the country. Then you begin to understand the limitations under which you must work; the difficulty of selling an idea. That sort of thing brings you down to earth, so to speak.

I certainly have realised that it's going to take a much longer time. I would be quite satisfied if I could convince myself that the foundations, at least, have been laid.

So, these trips that I make to the rural areas to meet the people — apart from the political aspect — would be to change attitudes. There have been results — no doubt about that — some of our proposed rural industries have been accepted to the point where we cannot meet the demand in some cases. People are asking for factories and machines to produce these things, and we have not been able to meet all their demands. Sometimes it's a land problem, sometimes a management problem...

Money is seldom a problem, really, the Federal Government can provide the money; but money alone, without proper management, would have the opposite effect to the one intended.

Doesn't politics get in the way? There was the case of the rural development scheme in Kedah which planned to bring in resource-based cottage industries, build roads and houses in this terribly poor area. The villagers welcomed the idea, but very soon they were split down the middle between two rivals for the position of Pengulu of the new community.

That is what I mean by the human element, which is the greatest stumbling block in any attempt to correct a social situation. But the fact is that people can change. If I believed that people cannot change, I would get out.

Change can be for the better or for the worse.

Of course you want change for the better, but along with it you'll have some bad effects. But if you can get as many people as possible to adopt the correct value system, to regard the need to have integrity as being very important, then I think you have a chance.

But when you impeach the integrity of the person who wants to create integrity... this is what has been done.

I must say they have been very clever, very successful, and now my own people are questioning me, asking whether I am corrupt. I will try and convince them, but if I can't, this is a democratic society. If they want someone else as their leader, whom they feel can do better, I must not struggle to remain in power. I don't think anybody should try and impose himself.

That's why I say, any number of times, the moment you don't want me, just say so. No problem.

Tomorrow: On his vision; leadership; social divisions; opportunities.
