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INTERVIEW/MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

'We Can Work Together'

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was in a brisk, business-like mood when he met Senior Editor Zohar Abdoolcarim and Senior Correspondent Assif Shameen two days after UMNO Baru's general assembly had ended. Excerpts from the 70-min. interview:

ASIaweek: You once said the UMNO dissidents were traitors and that you would not allow them into UMNO

thing is running smoothly. The only thing lacking is that there are still some people outside the party who should be in the party; therefore we made this offer, to make the party complete. My offer is not an offer of a post, but an offer of an opportunity to work together on the same side. Once you are in the cabinet you are on the same side. Working together would cause their followers to be part of the party. I know they couldn't care less whether they are ministers or not. But I thought if they would join, then we could work together.

Would you have made the offer if you had lost the Parit Raja by-election?

We would have made the offer anyway. The assembly proved that all segments of the party support the party [leadership].

Your opponents say the offer was made to score political points.

I am sorry if my sincerity is questioned. But if they accepted, the fact remains that I would have to have them in my cabinet and work with them. Once they accepted, I can't say, well, this is a very clever move. An offer is an offer. My feeling is, if we can work in the cabinet we can work in the party and down the line, and people who are disaffected will join up . . . I was a little shocked at the rapid rejection by Musa.

But your opponents say UMNO Baru's constitution first needs to be brought in line with that of the old

Baru. Now you have offered two of their leaders cabinet posts. Why the change of mind?

MAHATHIR: There was no basic change of mind. Immediately after the [party] elections they were in the party; then they decided to take the party to court. This was done by Tengku Razaleigh [Hamzah], not Datuk Musa [Hitam]. In fact, Musa was accepted in the party and appointed head of his old division. It is only subsequently that he decided to withdraw, saying that we were not democratic. I rejected only those who were instrumental in causing the party to be deregistered, and Musa was not involved there.

Now we have completely re-registered the party, re-organised the party. Every-

UMNO.

Well, we are democratic. The decision must be made by the majority of the party. The best thing is: join the party, give your views. If you want the constitution changed and you are supported by the majority, then it will be changed. Just now, we changed several provisions in the constitution because the assembly wanted it changed.

Will you support a move to bring UMNO Baru's constitution in line with old UMNO's?

No, we have our stand and they have their stand. We will give reasons why we want this and they will give their reasons. The members will vote and the majority's

views will be adhered to. If you want to join a political party, you can't say change the party first, then I will join.

But the dissidents say it's their birth-right to be in the new party because they were all members of the old one.

But we were not instrumental in deregistering the party. We had advised against going to the courts. The courts look only at the law; we look at the party, its history, its traditions. If you take away our power and give it to the courts and the courts decide to deregister us, you must be responsible.

The stakes this time were very high, however.

The stakes may have been high — the winner takes the prime minister's seat. I understand that. But we do it within the party.

Some say the two recent by-elections show that the Malay community is divided like never before?

I don't think so. Maybe in Johore, but in other places, no. There is some parochialism here. Johore leaders have been ousted; this is played up as a campaign point. But other states are not like Johore, [except perhaps] Kelantan. Outside Johore and Kelantan, how much support they have is yet to be tested. One has to remember that by-elections are not general elections. People feel that in by-elections you can go against the government because the government will remain.

We understand that Barisan Nasional coalition components at the grass roots level are divided over which Malay group — yours or Razaleigh's — to support. Are you concerned about this?

No, I am honestly not. There has always been this kind of disaffection among the rank and file. But when it comes to the crunch, people will support Barisan. The [component] parties know who they want to work with. They can support the second team, but it is not going to create anything because the second team is not the government. But if they do that, the discipline of Barisan requires that they leave.

What about the Malaysian Chinese Association? Its president Ling Liong Sik went on extended leave and said the government failed to fulfil its promises to his

party and the Chinese community.

Liong Sik came to see me and said he wanted to go on a three-month holiday. I asked why he wanted to go on leave. He said he was tired and a bit bored with politics. So I gave him leave. Subsequently, he asked me for six weeks. I went out of the country; in the meantime, something happened and he made this statement. He never said anything to me, that he was going away because he was dissatisfied.

It is unfortunate that he made the public statement. We have had problems in all the component parties all the time and we have resolved them. We have gone through many elections together and we have won. A coalition of thirteen parties must have problems of this nature. I've said it before: if everybody is unhappy, then we are doing well. If we try to satisfy

[one group], then we are being one-sided.

Just over a year ago, your government arrested more than 100 people, including parliamentary opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, for allegedly fanning racial tensions. Many have been released since, but many remain in detention. When will they be let go?

A few are still under detention because they refuse to give up stirring racial hatred. [Lim] was arrested not because he was leader of the opposition but because he was stirring racial tension in the country. We have seen what has happened in Sri Lanka and other countries. I am not going to preside over that kind of happening, not while I am the prime minister. If I am accused of being harsh, I can accept that. But I don't want to be accused of causing the deaths of many people . . . They will be detained until they come around to thinking it is not the right thing

to do. People review their cases every six months and make recommendations. Surely there are reasons why we release some and not others. If we release them and they go back to their old ways, there would be racial tension again and we would have to arrest them again.

There are allegations that the detainees have been mistreated, even that they've been tortured. Are you investigating these charges?

I have looked; there is no torture, unless you regard being detained as torture.

Your critics say your government's actions against the judiciary stem from a personal vendetta. What do you say?

People who talk like that talk through their hats. I only acted as is required of the prime minister. The second tribunal [which exonerated three of the five judges] decided quite differently from what people thought I wanted. To think that everything is a personal vendetta is sheer nonsense. There are 300,000 cases [pending] and I don't see how they are going to be tried if people are keen to get injunctions and other frivolous cases brought to the courts. But the government can't say a thing without being accused of interference. I have no recourse to defend myself in courts [where] remarks are made against me. One judge said I was confused. How can you say I am confused? In a court you don't pass judgement on a man's mental ability. I am a public figure. My credibility is very important. To me it's a very big thing, not just a frivolous remark. Can I sue the court? I can't do a thing. So I have to reply in Parliament.

How long will you go on?

I can't last forever. Once people don't want me, I'll go. I can't have a time frame because it's not for me to decide. It's the people who elected me who will decide. The moment they see I am not effective, they will throw me out.

How do you think you will be remembered as prime minister?

I don't want to be remembered. What is important is what I am doing now, whether I succeed or not. People are fickle. In a hundred years' time they will make an analysis and then tear to pieces all the achievements. ■