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BERNAMA INTERVIEW WITH NAJIB AND PAK LAH

Ahead of the 52nd General Assembly of Umno on Friday (June 19), Bernama has interviewed two of the three party vice presidents, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (the other V-P, Tan Sri Muhammad Haji Muhammad Taib, is still on leave from his post).

In both interviews, they spoke at length of Umno's future and challenges on the threshold of the new millennium, as well as analysed recent developments within Umno.

Following is the transcript of the Q & A by Zulkefli Salleh and Nin Zairani Mohd Ali with Najib.

Interview-Najib

THE NAJIB INTERVIEW

NAJIB: UMNO STILL RELEVANT IN NEW MILLENNIUM

Q: There are people in Umno who do not want to see the posts of President and Deputy President be contested in next year's party polls. What's your view on this?

A: For me, the Umno General Assembly is the highest body in the party and can make whatever decisions it deems necessary. And this is a question for the General Assembly to decide.

Q: While it is still undecided when a change in party leadership will take place, it is quite evident that factions and camps still exist within Umno. Is this healthy for its future?

A: If Umno is to be a strong party, it must be based on the concept of solidarity in the sense that we are not split according to certain factions and camps. And as leaders, we must have an open attitude. Let's not discriminate by only promoting people from our own camps. It is important for whoever is at the helm of Umno to accept Umno as a whole as he is seen as the father of Umno and not a leader of one group only.

Q: The Umno Youth Executive Council (Exco) once passed a resolution that the two top posts in the Youth wing should also not be contested. Is such a move good in efforts to bring up a new echelon of people with the calibre to become future leaders?

A: If I am not mistaken, this resolution has been withdrawn. This means the Youth Exco itself is conscious that the Umno Youth should stand on the principles of democracy. According to the history of Umno, the Youth leader's post is open for contest. But this does not necessarily mean that it should be contested. And it is up to Umno Youth members to decide who they want as their leader.

And as to whether they want a contest...I think this is something healthy on condition that if there is one, the process of a contest should be a clean one. If the process is not clean, it won't achieve its objective of bringing up leaders of calibre. Because usually a leader of calibre does not want to "play dirty".

Q: During the recent party polls at the divisional level, money politics was reportedly still a big issue. For example, one divisional leader was under probe by the Anti-Corruption Agency in connection with alleged use of money worth RM1 million. Why, in your opinion, is still this happening despite much efforts by the party to stamp out this menace?

A: There are several reasons for this. Firstly, a political post is seen as a means to get some rewards. So if in the past there was no pressure to jockey for positions, and in fact when Umno was formed people had to make way for others and people had to be persuaded to hold party posts, but now they need not be invited, they offer themselves for positions.

Secondly it is due to the changing times where now we are swarmed with educated people and it follows that when people's leadership capabilities become more obvious, the process of electing those are more eligible than others becomes more intense.

The third factor is the country's economic development where the economic boom of the recent past led to materialism as a human value. All these factors breed money politics which is not easy to get rid of. But the political will of the leadership is clear in that the ACA is given a free hand to investigate anyone involved in money politics apart from the disciplinary that can be taken.

This does not mean that money politics is not spreading. It is what I would call a "speed trap", if there is a speed trap it does not mean that nobody is speeding but those who get caught are those who can be detected, but for those who don't get caught, it's their luck....

Besides, the post of a divisional chief would open up the door of opportunities....if the person is an elected representative and is involved in business for instance. To completely wipe out money politics is difficult but we must fight it. And part of our efforts should be in the form of building of values and character which hopefully can compel us to reject money politics. But sometimes, even if we don't give, they would ask, unashamedly.

Q: Do you think that Umno is full of people whom you have just described while those who joined PAS were more concerned with the party's struggle....

A: No. Those who joined PAS were confused with the party's propaganda that it is the only party that champions the cause of Islam. The fact is that Umno is the largest Islamic party in the country. What we have done for Islam is more obvious. Umno is a ruling party and as a ruling party the competition becomes more intense. When this happens, everyone wants to win, and when you want to win, all forms of practices are considered "halal" as long as the objective of winning is achieved.

Q: Is it necessary for the do's and don'ts in the party polls to be tightened?. For instance, a candidate has to be a party member for at least five years before being eligible to contest or to have nominations from at least two divisions?

A: In principle, I agree to conditions being tightened. I see this as in line with the wishes of a majority of party members for party elections not to be made too simple as to cause too much politicking. We have to ensure that party leaders have some solid grounding. A leader or someone designated to be one should satisfy certain conditions like nominations from a certain number of branches, does not have a criminal record and so

on.

Q: After two years of the dissolution of Parti Semangat 46 which enabled its members to join Umno, do you feel that Umno is becoming stronger or otherwise?. Some former leaders of the party have alleged that they have been prevented from contesting for positions in the divisional polls recently?

Q: I think we have overcome this. We want to know of specific cases that this is happening, not mere rhetoric but with there must provide proof of this. If there is proof, we will ensure that they are accepted as Umno members. We found out cases of members whose application forms were not genuine or for other reasons. And after we have verified, we approved those applications that were genuine. But if there are still cases of those who are barred from joining Umno, they can bring up the matter to the Umno headquarters.

Q: There are many who regard joining Umno as a ticket to get a business permit. There are also those who think that they can get facilities like low-cost houses?

A: We want quality Umno members. If our intention is to make use of Umno for something else, then it means that we don't see Umno as a political institution that is important for the future of the Malays. Umno to me is not just any other political party, it is a political institution because its influence and role cover a whole spectrum of Malaysia and for this, Umno should not be made a tool. But at the same time it is not wrong for anyone holding a position in Umno but out of his ability and capacity, to obtain a certain project or a business opportunity.

This means that a person is eligible to obtain a low-cost house and he happens to be a branch chief, it is unwise for us to deny him of this house just because he is head of one Umno branch. This is unfair to him but if he already owns one low-cost house and after that just because he is holding this party post applies for another one, this means he is making use of his party position.

Q: Umno Youth Chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi is now speaking out against the practices of nepotism. Do you think that nepotism in this country is a serious problem?

A: Not as serious as some other countries in East Asia. But this process of reform should be conducted within the party, because the Prime Minister has advocated that Umno be a party to reform the Malay culture. What this means is that if we want to reform, he (the PM) thinks that there are weaknesses in our attitude and values. And the economic crisis we are in now should increase our resilience, our will to struggle and our good values.

Q: Can you comment on the currency turmoil and Malaysia's call for reforms in currency trading ...

A: The call is getting credence. Now we are not a lone voice in this as many have similarly voiced out that excessive speculations should be checked.

The only thing is whether such reforms can be carried out quickly. I think this will take time because it requires the support of the big powers. And it is still unclear if they will officially give their support.

Perhaps some groups within these countries will support. What is a challenge to us it to restore our economy as soon as possible. We can no longer wait. If our currency weakens further, it means more hardship to our people. We must really focus on restoring our economy.

Q: The Umno General Assembly is expected to discuss the country's economic woes. What are your hopes to delegates who are going to debate on this issue?

J: I happen to be the chairman of the Umno Resolutions Committee and I am in the process of vetting the resolutions that will be debated. We hope the debate on the economic problems will go beyond rhetorics but should lead to an intellectual debate in the sense of raising constructive ideas that would enable the party to chart its response and approach to deal with the economic downturn so as to help the country restore its economy.

We hope the delegates will take a serious look at the economic woes because they are indeed serious. If we don't restore our economic strength, it would lead to public discontent. We will submit to the government these constructive ideas.

Q. In your view, how would Umno ensure the it remains relevant in facing the new millennium. In what form would the party's struggle be in the future?

A. Umno is a party that is not leaning on dogmatic ideologies. Umno's struggle is based on the interests of the Malays, Islam and the nation. But Umno also gives room for flexibility and which enables the party to adopt policies that are pragmatic and realistic to achieve its objectives.

For example, Umno in the 1970's stressed on the creation of agencies to spearhead the entry of bumiputeras into business. But lately Umno promoted the policy of privatization that led to the reduction in government agencies' involvement in business.

In other words, the objectives are the same but the approach has been changed and this to me, would ensure that Umno remains relevant in the run up to the new millennium. Even more so with the plans to put Malaysia in the forefront of the information technology with the effort by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Q: While Umno could continue to be strong through its principles and approaches to articulate its struggle, how would you like the people to view Umno?

A: I think there ought to be reforms. But the parts in our agenda that have still not been fully achieved could not be considered obsolete. For instance, rural development. The fight against poverty and in the field of education, these issues remain relevant and not out-dated. Let us not look at the glamorous parts only. But if Umno is to remain relevant, the question is relevant to whom, the question is it must be relevant to the masses. This is because Umno will always remain a party that is not elitist but a mass movement. Here lies the strength of Umno. It is not uprooted from society and if we want Umno to be relevant, let us not think that the entire society has achieved a developed status, there are sections of society which are developed, there are those in the middle-class and still others who are the commoners who still require government assistance. To me those who are already rich and economically strong should stand on their own and compete and they can increase their participation in sections that

are normally provided by the government.

But for the middle-class, and what more to the low-income groups, efforts should not be spared to give them a better deal.

Q: In the field of education, is Umno in a position to assure that the low-income groups and the poor would continue to receive assistance?

A: For university education for instance, the cost of pursuing a bachelor's degree at a local university is around RM13,000 annually. This excludes the development cost. But the fees we are charging are only around RM1,200. This means that more than 90 per cent of the cost of university education is borne by the government of government subsidised.

The government recently launched the National Education Fund which would give out loans. This would ensure that no one who is academically qualified for further studies from among the poor will be denied the opportunity, thanks to money from this Fund. This is proof that the government is always conscious of the needs of the poor.

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