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Mahathir-Interview

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 16 (Bernama) -- TV3 will air a special interview with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at 9 pm today. Dr Mahathir was interviewed by TV3 Managing Editor of News and Current Affairs Chamil Wariya.

Following is the transcript of the interview.

Q: Can Barisan Nasional (BN) retain its two-thirds majority (in the coming general election)?

A: I think we can. In fact in 1995, we secured a landslide victory in that we almost won four-fifths of the seats contested. Therefore a two-thirds majority is not difficult for us to achieve.

Q: What is the basis for this optimism, Datuk Seri?

A: We have conducted a survey and we truly understand all the constituencies that we will be contesting in. We have divided the constituencies into black areas (where we will not win), white areas (where we will win) and grey areas (where our chances are 50-50). Out of the total, it is clear that white areas make up more than half, and grey areas, which are not so grey, give us the confidence that we can win more than 128 seats.

Q: Datuk Seri, you have repeatedly mentioned that a two-thirds majority is crucial. Who is it crucial for, for BN, for you or for the future of people and the country?

A: We see many developing countries which do not have a solid and strong government. They just have a simple majority, if there are some people or even one person who crosses over to the opposition party, then the government will collapse. As such, the government does not want to make a move which is unpopular although it is important. In fact if we have a big two-thirds majority we do not have to fear any defection or of members crossing over. As such, we are prepared to follow this line of action, which at first did not seem to be a good move, but after all this while, it has turned out to be favourable for the country. That is why a two-thirds majority is important, not to amend the constitution but to form a strong government which can carry out its duties and formulate policies and approaches which are good for the country.

Q: Datuk Seri, I will like to reflect back on the 1995 elections. If you recall, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who was then the leader of Semangat 46, was said to have eroded Umno's strength. This time around, they say it is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's turn to rock the party. Is this assumption true?

A:There is no doubt that Datuk Seri Anwar has influence but in 1990 not only did Tengku Razaleigh leave Umno but took along with him many Umno stalwarts. So did the PBS which decided to join the opposition party and this made our position very critical. This time around, it does not

seem like Keadilan will succeed in eroding Umno's resilience.

Q: Do you see the Anwar factor determining the success or failure of the Barisan Nasional?

A: We are not concerned if he will erode support for UMNO. Our concern is that he has the ability to trigger an economic crisis and cause disturbances in the country. That has been his trademark since 1974. When he is down and restricted, he will create unrest, In 1994, he lied to say that a boy had died because of hunger and called on students to demonstrate. When he was arrested once again, he urged his followers to demonstrate, destroy Umno and government property. After the situation calmed down, he claimed he was poisoned and once again there were riots. I am confident when he finds out that Keadilan has failed, and it will possibly fail 100 per cent, to save himself he will try to spoil the elections by instigating riots. I am confident he will get help from other countries.

Q: Since the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar over a year ago, it can be seen that government servants are now expressing their political stand. Some are openly against the BN government. Frankly, how deep is this problem ?

A: We don't deny that there are government officers, administrative personnel who sympathise with Datuk Seri Anwar. But their number has dwindled compared to initially when many believed that he (Anwar) was victimised. Today, it is clear that no victimisation was committed and Anwar's conspiracy theory was also found to be baseless.

We must remember that some government servants were members of Abim (the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) or the IRC (Islamic Revolutionary Council) when they were students and were trained since their university days to go against the government. They are working with the government now, some holding high posts, and they continue being anti-establishment. Previously, there were no such people working with the government but now there are and they try to instigate their subordinates.

So, the impression is that there is a sizeable number of anti-government personnel but the truth is a big majority of them is not active and they do not even support the opposition. They will make a thorough assessment of the parties and I'm convinced that they will support the BN.

Q: The few who are against the government, do they have any effect on Umno and BN ?

A: The effects are minimal but surely we do not want government servants to actively support the opposition as this could affect their daily jobs. While they can have political stand, we want government servants to carry out their duties as stipulated by the government. For whom they want to vote, it is their right.

But if they misuse office hours to campaign like teachers who purposely whip up hatred against the government, that will jeopardise the administration.

Q: Although their number is small, if left unchecked it could be a problem, just like cancer. So, what can be done to bring the government servants concerned back on the right track so that they adhere to the basic principles of government service, that is supporting the government of the

day ?

A: We must start from the beginning. While the government does not make it a habit to disturb students, the opposition not only disturbs but instigates them and they are willing to do so even in kindergartens. At kindergartens, the small kids are taught to hate certain people, the government. They give pictures of government leaders for the kids to trample on.

It is the same in schools and universities, while we want to leave university students alone, they (the opposition) go there and divert the students from their studies and instigate them for their political ends. So, it seems that the opposition has capitalised on our stance not to disturb the students. So, inevitably, we, too, will also have to correct the attitude of students even at the pre-schoolers so that they grow up without harbouring any hatred towards certain individuals or party.

This is the same case with us Muslims who are taught since we're small that pigs are dirty. When we grow up, we strongly hold to this, we can't touch (pigs). Similarly, if children are taught from small, they will grow up ingrained with this attitude. This is the opposition's long-term plan and we must counter this at the kindergarten, school and university levels.

Q: There are also the elements of personality cult among certain people. So, what should be done so that they can be back on the right track. What is your view?

A: There are hardcore people whose thinking cannot be changed, these people are extreme with their leaders and whatever we say they will not accept until their leaders say so. For instance, when their leaders say God indulges in profanities, they accept it because their leaders say it. When we show that in the Quran, God forbids us from slandering because slandering is more dangerous than murder. Unfortunately their staunch supporters will say it did not come from our Tok Guru (referring to Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat) and we will not believe although it's stated in the Quran, until our Tok Guru says so.

These are hardcore people. But there are sane people around them who we can bring them to the right track.

Q: In a year or more, you have been given various titles and I guess one of them is that you are anti-ulama. And I was made to understand that a tape recording of your speech said to be the proof to that is being circulated widely by Pas. Is it true that you are anti-ulama or religious clerics. What is your real stand?

Dr M: I am aware of that tape. The tape is an extract from a speech at a closed-door function of the National Religious Council. In that speech, I explained who are the real ulama. And I also said that we cannot accept anyone as ulama especially when we say ulama are the prophet's heir. We lift ulama's status so high, we can't just give ulama title to anyone. That's what I explained. I can accept ulama but I cannot accept everyone who claimed they are ulama.

I see that a lot of people who claimed that they are ulama who actually have other interests beside religion, political interest for instance, and because of this political interest they are willing to make religious interpretations which are against the Islamic teachings. How can I accept people like that. I explained that ulama are people like Imam Syafie, Imam Ghazali, Hanafi, Hambali and others. These are ulama and in our country we have people who are really knowledgeable in religious matters and they

don't have any other interest, only to give actual interpretations about Islamic teachings and they are ulama.

But now, we can see anyone claiming to be ulama. This is what I explained to the meeting and it's a closed-door meeting and any recording cannot be given to anyone. It was clear someone stole the recorded tape, this is a crime which is forbidden by Islam, as we know there is a very harsh sentence for people who steal. But worse than that is that after stealing the tape, they deleted a lot of words, lots of sentences and they slotted in with their comments.

And with that what I said had changed. I didn't say I am anti-ulama or I cannot accept ulama, but they purposely erased certain words in the recording so that when others listen to it they will be angry. Why Dr Mahathir is anti-ulama, actually I never (do so), I just interpret, I made sure who are actually ulama.

Q: That means you differentiate between genuine religious teachers and religious people who use religion for political interests. What is the danger of this group to our country?

A: The danger is that we will be getting Islamic teachings which are not the true teachings of Islam, according to the Al-Quran, the hadis and genuine religious books. Again for example, we know God never uses obscene language, it is clear words used by Shahnun Ahmad (author of the controversial book "Shit") were never used (by God). The Quran is good, the religious books are good, the hadis are good. But when people have a political interest and they want to defend a member of his party, they are willing to say God uses obscenities.

Yes, I admit God cursed Abu Lahab and others, but he cursed in other ways. That is why I feel that our belief will be threatened until we truly follow the teachings of Islam.

Q: Religious teachers who are like wolves in sheep's clothings have a big influence on society at grassroots level. What can the government do to handle the question of religious teachers who use religion for their political interest?

A: We have to get ulama without personal interests but are sincere in interpreting Islam, teach what is truly contained in Islamic teachings and they should make a stand that generally not all ulama are correct and should remember that in the history of Islam there were many ulama who had deviated. That is why in Islam there are many schools including the Ahlilsunnah Waljamaah, Shiite and others. There is also another religion which I do not have to mention here because there are followers of an Islamic ulama but he professes other teachings according to his personal interest and his intentions to become a prophet. So people have become his followers.

That is why when there are other interests, when the ulama have other interests, so the danger is so great that there is a possibility we may depart from Islam and set up a new religion with a another prophet.

Q: Besides being accused as an anti-ulama, you have been described as being a secular leader who is not committed to the Islamic cause. Has this accusation any basis?

A: The word secular was introduced by Westerners particularly Christians. In those days their rulers had strong influence from the church. And they found that they lost their power because the church was

too powerful. That is why they separated the church from the administration and the church was alienated from the administration which was considered secular. In Islam there is no separation between the so-called secular and others because Islam is Ad-Din or a way of life. Our way of life is not just praying, we farm, we work, we have craft, we have engineering, all these fulfil our way of life.

If we are learning to be engineers, lawyers, doctors that is a part of the Islamic religious requirement, and it is not interpreted as secular. That is why I feel that if a person becomes an engineer he also contributes to the Islamic religion and people, because if today the Muslims are downtrodden, persecuted by others it is because we do not have engineering capabilities to create explosive materials, create sophisticated weapons because we did not learn and we consider education as secular and we should not follow it. This is not secular at all, this is a part of teachings which enables us to carry out our social obligations. And the social obligations (fardhu kifayah) is very important in the Islamic community. What is being taught now concentrates on personal obligations (fardhu 'ain) for the personal self. I pray so that I can go to heaven but what happens to the community I don't care.

On the other hand Islam says that if the community is threatened because there are no doctors, engineers, this means the community generally has sinned even if they are praying, even if they perform the pilgrimage and others, but it is a sin because they do not have skills in areas that can save the Islamic people.

Q: In simple language, what sort of Islamic nation do you wish for us?

A: While not forgetting daily rituals, Islamic culture, Islamic values, we should at the same time master all knowledge that could protect Muslims from oppression. Today, if the Kosovars and Bosnians are slaughtered, Muslims were not able to stop it, making us sinful for not defending fellow Muslims. Thus, if we want to build an Islamic state, it would not be with the number of mosques or our clothing, but our skills.

In addition, we must not forget Islamic teachings, rituals, we must not forget about the needs of Islamic societies, their safety and their ability to defend themselves.

Q: Does this mean that the Islamic state that you envision must have the knowledge and economy so that it could be an example to other countries?

A: Yes, the current environment is crucial. Islam is not just for the 700 A.D. when Islam came into being. Islam is a religion for all times. As such it means Islam is suitable for this period, the period of IT, technology, atomic weapons and etc. If we are still confined to the skills of Islamic societies of 1,400 years ago, it means we are viewing Islam as a religion that fitted that period and not this.

Q: When dissolving Parliament recently, you said the upcoming general election is not meant to gauge anybody's popularity, it is an election to choose a responsible government which will bring peace and harmony to the people and country. There are those who doubt this and do not agree with your sentiment. What is your view on this?

A: I view election as being created for the people who know better about the kind of government that they need for their own benefit. Unfortunately we find that there are those who use the election for other purposes, for popularity or to instigate so that those who are capable will

lose. Perhaps the capable person is not a good orator or does not have sufficient money or goodlooks. As such they might lose despite their capabilities. Therefore, we will lose out because selection is made based on looks, popularity, ability to utter Quranic verses and others. In the end, we might not get a good government, meaning we will be losers and the country could not be developed.

Q: According to some people, you take the threats by the opposition pact under the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) lightly. And you have branded them as the "Divided Barisan Alternatif" (Barisan Berpecah Alternatif). Is this assumption correct or just a political gimmick ?

A: What is clear is that the electoral pact among them was not created by them. It was created by us, initially by Umno, MCA, MIC and after that it was expanded and we arranged this cooperation. We found out that after a while, there was understanding between us and our front was solidified. We have this understanding forever. It has been 25 years since the Barisan Nasional and before that the Alliance.

We find them (opposition) not having any undestanding. Meanwhile, in their manifesto they say there is no Islamic country but in Terengganu they will continue to hold on to their need to uphold Islam. Some of their leaders are willing to accept Lim Kit Siang as prime minister because they want DAP support when he himself had said that only an ulama qualifies to be a leader. Does this mean Kit Siang is an ulama who they suddenly are willing to accept?

So we can clearly see that they do not have the right thinking, basis, and fundamentals but just convenience. Therefore, there is no sincerity. In Barisan Nasional we understand each other and we are getting closer.

S: But they (the opposition) also have a joint manifesto and tabled the first 2000 Budget. So, do you see they have achieved some progress despite their own problems?

A: This is like a parachute (budget). They are making a manifesto which is not even supported by themselves. Just to give some picture to the public that they have a manifesto. But each of them has its own stand. DAP with its Malaysian Malaysia, Pas with its Islamic country, and Pas also said in its constitution that the prime minister must be a Muslim but is willing to accept Kit Siang as prime minister. So it looks like they accept anything. On the other hand, we found out that what they introduced was not a budget, this is not a real budget, it is like saying if I have money this is what I am going to spend. Especially, when one knows one will lose, one can promise anything, to give pension, to give reward, to give allowances to all.

Like the BN, we will not make any promises that cannot fulfill. We introduced a budget that we know that we could afford because we have managed the country's finances very well even during the economic crisis, we don't have to borrow, we don't have to kneel to IMF. We cured the economic problems by ourselves and today our economy grows again and we know we got enough money that could be spent wisely, not lavishly.

Q: You have earlier cautioned on the emergence of a new political culture on the opposition side which is the culture to riot. What actually do you see in this phenomenon?

A: We can always see when they were dissappointed, especially Datuk Seri Anwar, when he was upset he was willing to do anything. That is why there are riots, asking the people to torch cars, tyres, beat up the police, this is the

way. If he realises that he would not win and his hopes for his future are dashed, slim and gone. He would become desperate, and when he is desperate with a lots of money with him, he would incite chaos and his friends might also lend a helping hand.

Q: Malaysia's politics is a tug-of-war between the Malays and non-Malay. There is an assumption that Umno all this while has compromised a lot, but also made way to non-Malays' interests, like the private education policy, establishment of Chinese schools. Is this the true picture?

A: Not true at all. We only hold to promises and the understanding that we made when Malaysia got its independence. We should accept the fact that this country is occupied by the Malays as well as non-Malays. If we want to get rid of the non-Malays, we know we could not afford to do that. Therefore, we accept them as the citizens of this country. As citizens they must be treated as citizens. But they recognise the Malays' position and they did not question Islam as the official religion given that they are free to practise their faiths.

They did not object to the Malay language as the official language. They learned it, and even some of them are more fluent than us. But at the same time, they can learn their own language.

These make our country peaceful. If we want 100 per cent for us and for this our country is not peaceful, could not be developed, we can get 100 per cent but what is there in 100 per cent?.

For me it is better to get 50 per cent from something which exists that to get 100 per cent from something that does not exist.

If last time we saw the Malays as no more than padi farmers, today there are Malays becoming industrialists, businessmen, housing developers and they have been chosen by the giant foreign companies as directors, managers, etc.

That we achieved because our country is peaceful. The alternative is we fight among ourselves, destroy our country but we are proud with this but our country has been destroyed.

Q: But at the same time, among the non-Malays, there are some perceptions that they are not satisfied, they alleged that they did not get the share of the facilities, services, opportunities and made the so-called 17 demands in their recent petition. Is it true?

A I used to talk to the non-Malays and explained to them that in Malaysia with multi-racial communities there is no race that gets 100 per cent of their demands.

All parties will not get all that they claim. Even the Malays are not satisfied, even Chinese are not satisfied, Indians, too.. To me this is the best situation. In a multi-racial country, if there is only one race that is satisfied, that means other races are not getting their shares. That's why the Chinese complain as well as the Malays.

Q: One thing that you have always raised is the threat to our sovereignty and independence. Sometimes people say this is just created to distract attention from the real problem. So why is it important to defend our independence when we have been independent for so long, they ask?

A: We have seen an example near our country where we saw a top official from an international institution folding his arms and watching the leader of an independent nation signed away the economic powers of the country to the organisation. And in the end, the leader was forced to step down and now he does not have any place and the fate of his country is now under the

behest of foreigners.

Now that country has broken up. It has already lost one province, other provinces may also follow suit. All these are not the wishes of that country or its people, this is the wish of the foreigners. This means that foreigners are already controlling the politics of that country. If this can happen to that country, it can also happen to us.

If we are not careful, if we bow to foreigners, if we are not competent in managing our country's economy, there is a possibility that they will extend assistance with conditions. Then, we will lose our strength starting in the economic field and then they will pressure us that this person cannot be a minister, prime minister, in fact, there was a Vice-President who came to Malaysia and urged the Malaysian people to revolt and bring down the government, right in our own country. This shows how arrogant they are, they go to another country and ask the people of that country to bring down the government illegally, not through democratic voting but through riots. This shows the danger we are in.

Q: Do you see this as a result of say, globalisation, or that we are in a global village or a borderless world?

A: Globalisation now is interpreted according to the rich countries. This interpretation may not necessarily be good or right. There can be other interpretations of globalisation and we should consider what benefits us. Western countries are always confident that they are competent and that they are right. For example, they invented socialism. And then, they rejected socialism, and similarly communism. They invented communism supposedly to give fair treatment to all people. In the end, they scraped it because it could not be done and they went back to other ways.

Because of that, I believe that by following their interpretation, it may bring more adversity to the world until one day, they decide themselves to reject globalisation. We find their interpretation of globalisation is not right because it benefits only developed countries. Weak countries like Malaysia, like those in South East Asia, Africa, will lose out if globalisation is practised according to the West now and we may be colonised all over again.

Q: You have answered accusations that you are not anti-ulama, you said you are not secular and that you are committed to an Islamic nation. I would like to move on to slander and attacks which are more personal in nature what sort of character can stoop to make such allegations against you?

A: I am aware that they call me Firaun (referring to the pharaohs known for their cruelty, Mahafiraun, Maha Zalim. So we're all influenced by labels, brandnames. If the brandname is good, even if the product is not good, we still accept it as good. If the brandname is not good, even if the product is good, we will say it is not good. So what has been done to me is to stick a label on me so that even the good things that I have done will be made to look bad. Before, I was labelled an "ultra" by certain people. Because I was called an "ultra", things that I do, however, mediocre, was considered ultra because it came from one who was labelled as one.

Now they have labelled me a Firaun, cruel and other things even when there is no evidence of cruelty to anyone. All that we have done is according to the laws. But when we are stuck with such a label, feelings of hate against me will arise and whatever I say will not be accepted. It is politically-motivated so that I can be beaten. That's all.

Q: To certain people, these labels can weaken their spirit to work. On the contrary your performance is not inferior and you continue to work hard to develop the country.

A: Yes, we can sulk, we can run away from reality. But if we do that, it means that we are not responsible, we are putting ourselves above our duties. I have a duty. As long as I've been given the responsibility to do the job, I will do it ... just because of accusation by people I should not feel frustrated, I feel that people do not appreciate me and because of that I sulk and do not want to work, that to me is irresponsible.

Q: There were also accusations that several huge projects like KLIA, Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, Petronas Twin Towers were for personal glory. What is your view on these people?

A: Not personal but for our nation. If we have RM1,000 and spent RM1,500 it is irresponsible, wasteful. But if we have RM1,000 and we spent RM500 it is not wasteful. We have enough money to develop all these, although we have built the KLIA, Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, Twin Towers, our financial position is still strong, so strong that even when we were attacked it was not necessary for us to borrow. We were able to recover our economy ourselves and we have enough money. This means that that even though the projects are huge, we managed to implement them. So if we are capable, we are not wasteful. If we can build a RM100,000 house but we want a RM200,000 house, it is not smart. But what we have spent did not jeopardise our financial position. The world, international experts have admitted that Malaysia's financial position is still strong so much so that all our development projects do not affect our financial standing.

Q: What is the satisfaction you gain from all your hard work which seems to be not appreciated by a small number of Malaysians?

A: To me, I don't give much thought to what other people think of me. If I can see the results of the work done, which benefited the country, that gives me satisfaction. I don't want money or anything else for they won't bring you much further. If you want to eat a plate of noodle, that is all you can eat, even if you have millions of ringgit you can't eat 10 plates of noodle. So to me all these do not have any meaning. But looking at the results of your efforts to change the look of the country, it gives me satisfaction. If I walk around and see the rapid development, lots of cars on the road, people have enough money to spend, to go to restaurants, it gives me satisfaction. The results that we get are important. Not the reward that we gain. If people do not remember me after I die, it is alright, not a problem to me.

Q: In what way do you wish to be remembered after you are no longer the Prime Minister?

A: I do not give any thought on this. To me whether I am remembered or not, that is for the people. Those who want to abuse will always abuse, those who want to remember will always remember. I do not give much thought. What is more important is that the result of our efforts benefited the country. Today the world acknowledged Malaysia as the most developed country among developing nations. They no longer use us, they no longer laugh at us. They acknowledged that we are able to do something extraordinary, we organised the Commonwealth Games as the best games in the