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Khalil-Interview
UMNO SEC-GEN SPEAKS ON ELECTION ISSUES

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 27 (Bernama) -- The opinionated crowd now discusses such political jargons like change, freedom and empowerment with conviction in the run-up to the general election on Monday.

Is freedom being actually stifled? Does the Government listen to the people? Bernama posed these and other questions said to be swirling among the sections of society to Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who is Umno secretary-general and Barisan Nasional (BN) Director of Operations for the election campaign.

The following is a summary of the interview.

Question: How will the BN Government react to the clamour for change?

Answer: Let me bring a bit of historical perspective. Politics in Malaysia was not born yesterday. For years, millions of Malaysians have been participating in the political process. In fact, organised political campaigns date back to 1946 when an uprising forced the British colonialists to scrap the Malayan Union, which would have humiliated the Malay Rulers.

In the intervening years, politics was most pronounced in the rural areas. And naturally, with prosperity politics attracts more participants. Understandably, things evolve. Now, the jargons like empowerment and freedom are being mentioned by those so-called intellectuals and professionals.

The BN Government keeps abreast with all these developments. We accommodate everyone. We have to. We are the Government chosen by the people.

You see we listen, because, to continue to be relevant for many years to come, we have to keep feeling the pulse of the people.

Q: Some of the more vocal critics do not think the BN Government is receptive to suggestions, ideas and grouses. Your comments.

A: The truth is Umno, previously Alliance and now Barisan Nasional are key agents of change. The Alliance fought for self-determination and BN led the efforts to bring prosperity and self-esteem. We responded to calls for change. In 1969, the issue was economic changes, which led the Alliance Government to introduce the NEP. During the recent economic crisis, the Government set up the National Economic Action Council, which in turn, met more than 250 agencies, groups and companies. Together they drew up solutions to lift the nation from the economic difficulties.

Different issues arise at different times in our young nation's history. If BN had not responded to those issues at those times, where would we be today? (Some people) have sold the idea that BN is not receptive to change. Are they saying we are the same Government with the same policies from 1946 till today? That we are static? Are we still talking about the same thing for the last 42 years? Are we still discussing whether we should irrigate the Muda Area or should we switch from rubber to palm oil? Are we still discussing to have a separate stock exchange from Singapore or have our own national airline? No. We listen, we discuss and we get on with the job of formulating policies suitable for the time and place.

We listen, we listen, and we act. This is reflected in our actions. The

idea to set up Institut Teknologi Mara (it is now a university) and Bank Bumiputra came from the Bumiputera Economic Congress. Umno embraced them.

BN as a whole is as receptive. When the Chinese associations submitted a memorandum recently, many wondered how the Government would handle it. We listened and we engaged them in discussion.

In our system, the views of every single Malaysian are appreciated. When people complain about toll rates, we listened, lowered the rate and subsidised the cost. When the business community complained that high interest rates were crippling their businesses and homeowners were at risk of losing their homes, we listened and formulated policies that increased liquidity in the market and lowered rates. When there was feedback about having to state religion in the IC, we amended the policy to reflect the views of Malaysians. We listened and we responded.

Q: Yet, some believe powers are centred in the hands of a few. How do you rebut this?

A: At the risk of repeating myself, I shall remind you that the Government has always listened. Umno, for instance, has a system where something raised by a branch member can journey all the way to the Supreme Council and if needs be, to the Umno General Assembly.

Undoubtedly there had been abuses as evidenced in 1993 when the sanctity of the grassroots voice was compromised. Campaigners for (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim, who took on (Tun) Ghafar Baba for the No 2 post in Umno, manipulated the process of nomination, which carried 10 votes each.

We hold various meetings to gather feedback. For the Budget, for instance, we started preparations in May and held a series of dialogues. Now we have National Economic Consultative Council (Mapen2). We invited the Opposition and they flatly said "No". If you had ever attended meetings at various levels of Umno, you will see how the "no freedom" accusation is such a myth.

There is a lot that one can do to participate in political debate. You can join a political party or form a loose political discussion group and talk to MPs to present your views. This is a kind of a pressure group. You can write your personal views to politicians or to newspapers and to various other publications. We welcome them. I myself have received countless letters over the years from public-spirited Malaysians. Some wrote with a lot of feeling, admittedly. I still read them. Some of these letters I will bring to the Cabinet. My Cabinet colleagues do the same.

Q: Will the next BN Government actually give Malaysians across the board the space to express their feelings?

A: When you get something going -- write, speak to politicians and express your views at any available forum, you will realise there is so much freedom in the country. There is so much space for those with a profound or not very profound interest in politics. But you must do something about it. BN is the most democratic party in this part of the world. It needs feedback. And in the area of giving feedback, ordinary Malaysians must not surrender your rights to the Chandra Muzaffar-Lim Kit Siang-Jomo Sundram crowd. They must not be allowed to dictate opinion. They are a small group. Every Malaysian is independent and liberated with a mind of our own. All you know, the vast silent majority has views in sharp contrast to that of these vocal critics.

Q: BN has been accused of selling this idea of nation building as a way to perpetuate its stay in office. Your comments.

A: Critics may think that nation building is laughable. Nation building is real and every Malaysian should contribute towards making the nation a

better place for us and for those who come after us. It is about building confidence and self-esteem which come with knowledge and competency. Hard work is essential. We have to be tech-savvy. We must not be mentally lazy. The world is our market place. Others have had a head start. As a relative newcomer, we have other advantages -- fresh ideas and refreshing attitudes.

Nation building is no monkey business. We have come this far as a result of nation building efforts by our past leaders, which we had built upon. We must think as a nation. We must act as one. We have to remain united. All the prosperity that we have enjoyed did not come naturally. BN is serious. We work hard. The rakyat is in this with us. We work as a team. It is this kind of team spirit that had brought us prosperity, peace and stability. We will work harder to ensure more success. That promise we have delivered time and again.

Q: With more prosperity, don't you think the clamour for change will grow?

A: That is natural. Essentially it is all right to talk about change. Yet, we in BN and I am sure the same applies to the majority of the people, strongly believe change should be about upgrading what we had already built together. Malaysians and Barisan Nasional have been together for 42 years. We are like an old married couple. Through the years, we may grouse and we may complain and we make a bit of change here and a bit of change there. But you don't throw out your wife or husband of 42 years just to experiment for five years. We are in this together. We know each other and we adjust and we accommodate.

We cannot throw what is good and what is working just because we want some bit of excitement and change for the sake of change. We say to all voters, Give us the mandate to make the changes you want. We have always listened and responded to the views of the voters. We are your agents for change.

Q: BN leaders keep urging the voters to turn out in full force. Any particular reason for this?

A: We are into the next stage of nation building here. It is you, your friends, your little brother, your mum and everyone around you who make the country great. It is the ordinary, hardworking Malaysians who decide the country's destiny. Not Al Gore (US Vice President), not Douglas Paal (president of Asia Pacific Policy Centre sponsored by Anwar) and the opposition leaders.

We vote not to emphasise hatred or get even at some politicians. It is about ensuring the future of your children and the future of those who come after them. The nation has done pretty well. If we pause and look around us, this is obvious. Barisan Nasional represents harmony, unity, peace and success.

Q: Can a country do well without a credible Government?

A: Politics is about leadership. Leadership requires strength, courage, discipline, stamina and intellectual depth. One has to make hard decisions and stand by it. And, one has to be prepared to be unpopular.

Why is it that the autobiographies of great leaders become best sellers? It is their ability to inspire. It is nice for Barisan Alternatif to say theirs is a collective leadership. BN is also based on a collective leadership led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad. That's why you see a lot of questions being raised about the opposition's prime ministerial candidate.

Most Malaysians suspect they could not agree. If you had studied trends, you would have seen that the opposition stayed clear from mentioning that Anwar is their PM's candidate during the campaign period.

Pas supporters especially don't like the idea. Some of my friends in school actually support Pas from those days. They don't think Anwar is suitable to be their leader. These Pas supporters have a lot of respect for Dr Mahathir.

I have been telling people that for collective leadership to succeed, one needs a leader, a strong and tested one at that. Anything else is a recipe for feuding, bad stabbing and vote of no confidence. It is leadership and proper governance plus the sweat of every Malaysian that has brought us comfort and prosperity.

The country most definitely cannot run on autopilot. It has to be steered in the right course. Indonesia may be rich in resources including oil but the Indonesians are far from prosperous.

Q: Finally, what do you think of the silent majority?

A: That is our central theme. They are the ones who don't get into petty political arguments. They don't express themselves. But that does not mean they are less political than those who talk politics all the time are. This is the only opportunity for the silent majority to emphasise their convictions. They are traditionally hardworking, thoughtful Malaysians, successful and believe in the nation building. They do not succumb to the tricks of the opposition who had been playing the underdogs line ("We are certain to lose. So give us a few seats").

The silent majority must come out in full force and end this senseless politicking inflicted on them by the firebrand type of politicking where nothing is right. Malaysians know that it is not true.

Let's get on with our lives.

-- BERNAMA

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