

Vital that leaders are dean, says PM

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Q: What is your evaluation of the recent Umno assembly?

A: Umno meeting was largely supportive of the leadership. There were some unhappiness, but this was due to the lack of understanding. That is why after the explanation was given, the support was strong.

They even gave standing ovations twice when I replied to the points they raised. With a party of 2.8 million members, it is sometimes difficult to communicate. Of course loyalties to individuals during the election interfere with the loyalty to the party. But once the election is over Umno should become stronger.

Q: Why did you stress on money politics?

A: My one great fear is that a leader, especially the prime minister of this country will come into power through corruption. That means that corruption will be tolerated by the leadership and everyone will be corrupt. So it is very important that since Umno leaders will also become government leaders, they should be clean.

Everything possible should be done to ensure that only clean leaders should be elected.

Q: It was widely suspected that some of those who won the vice-president seats and supreme council seats used money.

A: There are a lot of accusations. But I cannot work on the basis of accusations. I must have clear evidence. I think people did not interpret what they were doing as being corrupt. For example, they say they did not give money to the people who vote as party representatives from the division. They were only giving money to those people who are going to canvass for votes, paying for their travel, hotel, for example. They think that is not corruption.

To them corruption means giving money to actual voters. They pay their workers because they cannot expect their workers to spend their own money. My view is that even that amounts to corruption.

However there are two different periods; one before they gave an undertaking not to campaign and one after they gave the undertaking.

Before undertaking not to campaign they

This is the 17th and final instalment in a series of monthly columns of commentary and opinion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Mainichi Daily News, that began in February 1999. To bring the series to a close, Mainichi's Hong Kong correspondent, Akiko Kato, recently met with Dr Mahathir to discuss his views on the political and other issues now facing Malaysia.

**Dr. Mahathir's
World Analysis**

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were spending money, which lead to accusations of corruption, but after they decided not to campaign at all, no more money was given out.

I have to admit though that some of them were believed to continue to use money. I don't know for certain whether those who used money won.

Q: Can you implement more strict regulations in the party, for example, prohibit paying the delegates and their family for travel fees, hotel expenses, etc.

A: I will try but it will be very difficult.

Q: Isn't it true that now the Malays are getting richer and this makes them unrespectful of the good values of life?

A: It is natural when a person suddenly gets richer that he loses balance. If you give a million dollars to a poor person, you don't expect him to use it wisely. He will just spend it on anything he likes. That is one of the natural human reactions to sudden wealth. The duty of the Government is to remind the people, to talk to the people that it is not good to do away with good values, such as to know how to be grateful. If you have a sense of gratefulness you will be more responsible.

The Government has to revive the culture of the Malays to instill in them good values, not only those which they used to have but also those they didn't have before. It is a process of rebuilding the culture of people.

Q: We the Japanese tend to forget the good values of life. Do you still have some

areas that you want to adapt for the Look East Policy?

A: When we first implemented the Look East Policy, the Japanese showed qualities which were able to overcome the difficulties of the post-war years. The Japanese worked hard, were willing even to be paid with just a bowl of rice in order to revive the economy.

In the end Japan succeeded. That is the quality that we want to copy; the hard working, dedicated, loyal attitudes of the Japanese workers, and the concerned attitude of the Japanese bosses to the workers. In Japan there is lifetime employment. You don't always do that now. In other countries, they believe that the welfare of the workers is the responsibility of the government, not the companies. After all they paid tax to the government. But that kills the loyalty to the company.

Without loyalty the company cannot really succeed. So those were the values that we want to copy. But what we are seeing today, is the result of the exposure of Japanese young people in particular, whose culture is not deeply ingrained. They are exposed to the values that they see in the West. That is why you are seeing irresponsible behaviour in Japan.

Admittedly you cannot protect your people from outside influence. But every country, which loves its own culture must attempt to deliberately, consciously instil the good values among the younger generation. That is what we want to do in Malaysia.

for continuing the progress of this country. So whether I like it or not, I have to stay back, and I have to see that the people are in place, who can carry on the work.

Of course, they may disagree with what I have done. Then they can change after I leave. But I must put the machinery in place to carry on Vision 2020. We have a distinct objective.

Q: What kind of things are left for you to achieve?

A: I think that it is important to a country for the leadership to have ideas. You must come with ideas to progress the country, to solve the problems. And to anticipate changes. That is very important because if you don't come with ideas you cannot develop the country.

I still have a lot of ideas on how to develop Malaysia. It is not what I achieve that matters. It is what Malaysia achieves that is important. If I am not the leader I can still do a lot of things.

Q: What kind of problems gives you the biggest headache?

A: The biggest headache comes from trying to balance the development of the indigenous people with the non-indigenous Chinese and Indians. The Chinese are used to urban living, and to wealth. So they are able to deal with prosperity. But the Malays are rural people, very poor people and suddenly they have moved to the towns. In the urban area the life-style is different. And they have more money. They cannot handle these changes in a way that is productive. The Government worries that it may lead to a breakdown and failure.

Q: How can you solve this?

A: We have to provide the leadership. We

have to provide the right values for them. If necessary we have to talk to different groups of people on the dangers that they face. Maybe they will listen, maybe not. But whether they do or not, we have to try.

Q: Don't the rural people feel the gap between urban people that they are left behind?

A: It is not completely true. If you look at the Malaysian villages today, they are much better than before. You have good roads, electricity, water supply, better houses. They have not been neglected. We have a democratic system, and the opposition is free to spread any amount of lies. They instigate the people. They say that the friends of prime minister are very rich. That everyone including the members of the opposition is richer is ignored. Of course each one doesn't get the same amount of benefits. Obviously not everybody will be a millionaire. But the opposition tells the people that all the rich people are friends of the Government in order to make them hate the Government. The rural people are told this even though they themselves do not feel the gap, which separates them.

Q: But if the politician goes to his constituency and talks with the people that will solve a lot of problems.

A: That is totally right. That was what I was saying. They have neglected their duties.

Q: Why did you end your opening speech with prayers?

A: I have tried all kinds of ways to

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Q: There are Malay businessmen who only want to rush over profits, and even use your name that "I am very close to the Prime Minister". What do you think?

A: People who have been poor are not too particular about how they can become rich. That is why they use my name. My office has told people that if anybody uses my name, they should check with my office. I don't favour anybody, but when somebody is not fairly treated by the bureaucrats then I will help. What is the good of me being a prime minister if I cannot help people?

Q: After the Umno General Assembly did you decide on your retirement?

A: Frankly, I would like to retire as soon as possible. But I also have to be responsible. I just cannot walk out and leave everything in the state of not being prepared

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guide Umno members, particularly with regards to corruption. But still they are easily misled. So as a last resort I prayed to God.

Q: There is a criticism that **your sons sit on many boards as executives in private companies.**

A: I know that they are in business and sit on many boards. Many people sit on many boards, but that is normal. They are invited to sit because of their experience. They are usually not paid or given privileges as board members. The companies benefit from their experience and know-how, not them.

Q: You have mentioned that Pas is using the mosques for political functions. Do you think that **Umno will go back to stress the importance of religion?**

A: We have always stressed the importance of religion. But we have not made use of religion in order to frighten people into supporting us. Instead we preach the brotherhood of Islam as is enjoined by our religion. Pas on the other hand use the mosques to divide the Malays, to create hatred for the Government in order to get votes.

Q: Do you think there is a threat from opposition such as Pas towards the government? If so, what is it?

A: There is of course a threat. Pas may be able to make Malay Muslims fanatical and to hate us so that they may become violent. But we think we can spread the true teachings about the moderation of Islam and prevent this from happening.

Q: Pas newspaper has been charged? Why is this so and is it against freedom of speech?

A: In Malaysia we have three different races. They used to hate each other and in 1969 there were race riots and more than 100 people were killed. Some newspapers were responsible for instigating race riots and violence. We have to prevent this by requiring newspapers to be licensed. *Harakah* is licensed as a party paper not for general circulation. It prints lies and tries to stir up hatred between the people. Because of this *Harakah* must be limited to the same number of issues as other political party papers. It has not been banned.

Q: Now that (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) is on trial, is he a threat to you or to the government? Will he come back to the political scene again?

A: Personally, he is not a threat. But the opposition will use his fate to stir up hatred against the National Front in order to get votes. In the 1999 elections, Anwar's "black eye" picture was used successfully to alienate government supporters.

Q: Why did you have to mention about Anwar over and over again during the Umno assembly?

A: I had to mention because many still find it difficult to believe that he committed immoral acts. Until they do they cannot be expected to defend the Government convincingly. The truth must be told openly or people will think we are trying to hide things, hoping people will forget.

Q: You have also accused (Datuk Ahmad) Zahid in your speech, and yet he was elected as a supreme council member with a strong support. How do you analyse this?

A: Zahid has recanted and no longer supports Anwar. It is common to welcome back the prodigal son who has admitted that he is wrong.

Q: If you have so many things ahead that means that you cannot step down?

A: I think when major problems are solved I will step down. I cannot say when. Because then it will affect what I want to do to change the atmosphere in the party.

Q: You appointed your successor (Datuk Seri) Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi). How do you evaluate him?

A: We have had four prime ministers. Each one had his own style when carrying out basically the same policies. I believe Mr Abdullah will not change the policies but he will do things his own way.

Q: How do you evaluate yourself?

A: I cannot evaluate myself. It is for others to evaluate. If I do so, it will be biased. Some people want me to stay, some are waiting for me to go. What I think of myself is not important.

Q: I have been doing this interview for almost two years, and I find out that whenever you face serious problems you look younger.

A: Life without problems would be very dull. Problems are exciting challenges. When you solve problems you feel happy and probably look young. I have solved many problems and that may make me look young.

Q: Were these two years the toughest time for you?

A: I must admit that these two years have been one of the toughest times because of a combination of the attack on the economy by outside people over which I had no control; and because Anwar was found to be not of the right moral character to be my successor. His removal caused a lot of misunderstanding.

Q: It was said that you and Anwar didn't get along for a long time, after he was in favour of IMF reforms, why did it take almost a year to remove him?

A: I did not agree with his management of the country's finances but I did not agree with him all the time. I could still tolerate him. But when his morals were found to be bad I had no choice but to remove him.

Q: I also found out that the image created by Western media about you is totally wrong. How do you feel being portrayed as dictator? Would you like to change that image?

A: The important thing is what people in this country think of me. As you can see despite the Western media calling me a dictator the Malaysian people gave my party a three-fourth majority. I don't think I can change the image because I will continue to condemn the West and their Press if they do anything wrong. They hate me for that. They would like to see me go and so they will always give me a bad image.

Q: Once you have mentioned that you are a doctor so you face people to cure them. Is that why you are weak when it comes to throwing out people?

A: I don't throw out people. I try to work with everyone. People make mistakes but throwing out people does not solve my problem. That is why I never change my staff. I try to get them to do the right thing. If I fail I will try again.

Q: Is it possible that the Prime Minister and Umno president be a different person?

A: Well it is possible in many countries. The president of the party need not be prime minister. On the other hand when you want the party's policy to be followed by the government, the best thing to do is to have the party's leader as the government leader. Otherwise there will always be conflicts between the party's president and the CEO of the government.

Q: If you say about human factor, is it possible it can happen between you and Abdullah?

A: I wouldn't know. I think it is possible. I get along with him fine. When you are actually holding an office, you may change. He may change when he becomes the prime minister.

Q: You have mentioned that you will devote (time) to party work, and hand over work of prime minister to your deputy, what kind of work are you going to pass to him?

A: Not all of the work, some of it. I will find somebody else who can do the routine work. I have to look at a lot of papers, meet a lot of people. I might cut down meeting business people. Either I will hand that over to the deputy, or just reduce it. I might reduce visits abroad. He can do some of that, but we will share our work.

Q: What is your evaluation of Abdullah?

A: He is a good man. He is not the same as me, because no two people are the same. He used to be against me, but as far as I am concerned I don't hold that against him. If you do good for the party, I support.

Q: Why did you decide for him to be the next leader?

A: Well he was one of the vice-presidents of Umno. There were three vice-presidents, one was asked to take leave, the other was perhaps too young. These presidents were chosen by the party. He has a good reputation, and is straight, not trying to grab for power too much.

Q: How do you evaluate the economic situation of Malaysia?

A: The Malaysian economy has turned around, and it is doing very well much better than other countries, which have also turned around.

That is because no one with other interest is dictating to us. We

have stabilised the currency so that nobody can play around with it.

In other countries they are still playing around with the currency. So the freedom to revive the economy is not there. You do something that they consider is against their interest, they will devalue your currency. You will be constrained by this fear. In Malaysia because the currency is fixed and stable, we can do other things, such as reducing interest rates. We can promote sales of property, or of cars.

We can help Malaysian companies to recover and so contribute to economic growth.

Q: How is the bank restructuring?

A: We are working on that. It is quite complicated. Malaysian banks are involved in many things, such as brokerage, merchant banking, etc. They also have social obligations. So the banks are not purely commercial in nature. Do we break up the banks, and isolate each function? Do we allow them to go on doing the same things? Anything we do with the banks will disrupt the economy. So we have to be very careful.

Q: Originally the Government announced that all the banks will be merged into six banks. However the idea was changed later.

A: There was a proposal for six banks, but there was a lot of unhappiness among the bankers. The Government is very sensitive to what the private sector thinks. If we find that it is not considered good by them for good reasons, we are quite willing to change. We must keep our ears open. For example, whether it is good to separate banks from brokerage firms. What are the pros and cons? Even with short term capital flows, we have changed, because we listen to the market. We are not rigid.

Of course, if the market comes up with an idea which we think is not acceptable, we will reject it. For example, they say the ringgit is too weak and we should allow it to appreciate. We think carefully.

At this moment, we don't see any reason for change. We have already said that if our neighbouring countries depreciate or appreciate by 20 per cent., at that stage we will consider whether we will change the exchange rate. We will base

changes on our own perception and assessment. At this moment what is wrong with 3.8 ringgit? Nobody can say it is affecting us very badly. The stock market is doing very well.

Q: Now you have a lot of new political leaders in the world. What do you think is needed for the new world political geography?

A: There should be no rigidity. The old problem was due to rigidity. If you are in the Western camp, even if the Western camp does something wrong, you still support them. If you are in the Eastern camp, you support it without reservation. That is not right. Today I think people are more flexible. If you do something good the people are with you, but if you do something bad, then people will withdraw support from you. Malaysia always supports the idea of flexibility. We are not tied to any camp, neither to the East nor the West.

Q: What do you think of the role of NGOs and developing countries?

A: Because of their willingness to defy authority and to use violence NGOs can sometimes be more effective than governments even. Where the developing countries could not stop the WTO from forcing their policies through the NGOs clearly succeeded.

But NGOs representing a small minority negates the rights of the majority. They are therefore an undemocratic force. If the world submits to the NGOs, then there will be anarchy as the NGOs have different and often conflicting agendas. It is difficult to reconcile their struggle for the rule of law through breaking the law. But like the free market the world has come to accept the NGOs and anyone going against them would be considered undemocratic.

Q: How can the small power challenge the gigantic power?

A: If people speak out together, you can achieve something even against the strong. For example the formation of the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC). How can countries, which form regional organisations like NAFTA deny others the right to form a regional organisation? This is double standard. So

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'Currency swap agreement a good start'

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we must all stand up and say so. But if we refuse to act together then the strong will always bully us, the weak.

Q: Regarding EAEC, now we have Asean+3, especially in the financial field. We have recently agreed on currency swap agreement, and this is a drastic change if we think back of the 1997 IMF World Bank Meeting in Hong Kong.

A: Yes I totally agree with you. We have **made progress**. Why should a country like the United States object when we are not doing more than what they are doing? Regarding the currency swap agreement, it is a good beginning. It certainly provides a cushion. In case anything happens, then you can have access to this money. But eventually we should have the Asian Monetary Fund. AMF should be able to monitor the performance of each country and give early warning of what can happen.

For example, if you adopt a certain policy that is wrong, or the banking system is not functioning properly, AMF should be able to warn and advise. Then you can avoid financial crisis.

□ The text of this instalment and all of the others in the series are archived at the Mainichi Interactive Web site and may be accessed at <http://www.mainichi.co.jp/english/mahathir>