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Mahathir-Interview  
Q & A WITH PRIME MINISTER

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad granted an exclusive end-of-year interview to Bernama at his office in Putrajaya, near here.

He answered questions from Bernama Editor-in-Chief Jaafar Hussin, Executive Editor Azman Ujang and Assistant News Editor E. Sivabalan during the one-hour interview.

Q: After the Lunas by-election, there have been calls from within and outside Umno for change in your style of leadership, how the government implements its privatisation policy and how the leadership deals with the "non-performing" ministers and other politicians. Your comment please.

A: Well, I don't really know what is the change that they expect me to undertake. But what I do know is that most of the things that I do are not very well understood, especially the process of making the decisions is not understood. Many people think that I make all the decisions by myself. But they are not based on my own decisions but they are made in the Cabinet. In the case of (Umno) politics, they are made by the supreme council and there is full and unrestricted discussion before any decision is made. So, even if I change my style of leadership, if the others won't change, it's not going to make any difference at all. As far as privatisation is concerned most people do not seem to understand that we have been careful with privatisation, right from the word go we have privatisation but it would not be at the expense of the workers. They cannot be sacked, they can be offered new salary schemes but it must be better than the government schemes and they must be entitled to shares in the privatised entity and all other conditions that are beneficial to them.

In one case at least there is a demand for privatisation, by the Port Klang workers, for example. It's not true to say that it's purely my style of doing things. It is something that we discussed together and made the decisions collectively, we are responsible for the decisions. People who are in the Cabinet will know this and the Umno supreme council will know that we had a meeting once from 8 o'clock to 4 o'clock in the morning and everyone of them spoke at least twice because I allowed them, I gave them a chance to speak. So, as far as I can see, what we have done has succeeded, otherwise this country wouldn't be able to develop this way, nor will it be able to overcome attempts to impoverish the country as had happened to other countries.

Q: Are you disappointed with the failures of some of the privatisation plans, for example, the latest buy-back of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) shares from Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli at RM8 per share which is highly criticised by certain sections of the people?

A: I'm disappointed that this (MAS privatisation) has failed. But supposing there had been no economic downturn, no recession resulting from the devaluation of the currency, resulting from pulling out capital from the stock market thus causing the share prices to go down very rapidly. Any company facing that situation will fail, and we have done very well and only a few companies have failed and these are companies which are rather sensitive to what happens in the environment. They fail not because they are badly managed but when the share market goes down by 90 per cent, any company will fail, and we are living in a world where there are so many fluctuations in the demands by the market, the price of petroleum for example, and this is going to affect the performance of the company. We, on

the other hand, regard the airline as not just a commercial entity but it also has its social obligation. For example, the fare within the country is very low and yet the government does not subsidise. So they (MAS) keep on losing millions of dollars because the government doesn't want domestic fares to increase because the public doesn't want it.

Any company would lose money if you do that. If you add to that, the fluctuation in the price of petrol, the differentiation in the value of our currency, RM2,000 fare now is not RM2,000 fare before the devaluation. RM2,000 now is very cheap and yet if we raise the fare, people will object very strongly. How long can MAS sustain this kind of situation? That is why the government has to take over because no company can survive under that condition. The government has to take over. The implication is that the government will have to bear the cost. In a way, it is a subsidy. But if it is going to be privatised, then we will have to allow a privatised company to fix its own rate. In fact if we were to sell shares of MAS to a foreigner or foreign company, the one thing that they will insist is on that they must have freedom to determine what is good for the company and if you tell them you must subsidise domestic fare, they will say no. They will say 'we are a commercial enterprise and the company cannot be asked to subsidise'. So that is the problem faced by MAS.

Q: How do you react to suggestions that the Malays are uniting under PAS?

A: I don't think they are uniting under PAS. But PAS has been successful in causing the Malays to hate the government because of their hate campaign which has gone on for the past 30 over years. When people hate, then they do not see reason anymore. PAS even tells them that you must not be grateful to anybody who gives you something. So, while we help the Malays to get education, to become professionals and all that, they say that we don't have to be grateful to the government. This is our right. This teaching by PAS has influenced the thinking of the youths.

Q: Is the top leadership to be blamed for Barisan Nasional's defeat in Lunas and also the problems in Umno?

A: I would admit that when the party fails I am responsible. Ultimately, I am responsible. But if anything happens, there is not just one reason. There are numerous reasons. In the case of Lunas, Umno in that constituency is very weak. And Umno in a constituency where the candidate is never a Malay, never an Umno man, we are weak. In cases where an Umno person is going to be the candidate, Umno is surely very strong. That is normal also. Secondly, I must say there are weaknesses in the organisation and of course there is the issue of the Chinese objection over the Vision School and also the Suqiu demands which have been played up including telling the Chinese in Lunas that that if we have the Vision School the Chinese will have to wear the Malay skull cap. This is the kind of lies that has happened. The picture of the (BN) candidate (S.Anthonysamy) who is a Christian in the dress of the Pope created a lot of resentment among the Malays. There are many factors which led to the defeat in Lunas and we hope to be able to correct them.

Q: Could the BN's defeat in Lunas also be due to the lack of coordination among the BN component parties?

A: Yes, lack of coordination, very poor local support, in terms of arranging the talks (ceramah). And of course the Opposition actually "flooded" Lunas with outsiders, something like three or four times the population of Lunas. They also prevented our supporters from going in (to Lunas). They appointed themselves as the police to examine people's identity card and all that. This kind of thing threatens away a lot of

voters. Even some of our women workers were physically assaulted or they just surrounded these people and tried to frighten them into not campaigning.

Q: Will the BN's defeat in Lunas change the chemistry of power-sharing within THE BN, especially with the MIC?

A: No, we still stick by our agreement that we have to give MIC some seats where the Indian voters will be small. There are no constituencies where the Indian voters are big, but the Chinese and Malay voters must help MIC because in other places, MIC can beat the numbers just to tilt the result in favor of Barisan Nasional in places where we expect the majority is very small.

You see, 200 or 300 Indian voters do make a difference, so we have to help the Indians to get some seats, otherwise, if we go by Indian majority constituency there is none. Are we saying Indians must not contest at all? We are the Barisan Nasional, we have to support, let just stick by that.

Q: Some voters are saying that Umno has not done enough to attract the Malays, particularly the younger generation. Now, how much can Umno do to address this, or is there a need for Umno to change its direction in order to attract the younger generation?

A: You know, when Umno came to power, one of the things is to give the Malays as big a opportunity to acquire education as possible, so we started by sending them abroad. Once we do that, we must not disturb them. If you go and disturb them, they cannot finish the semester. You cannot bring party politics into the campus, the students won't be able to study. so we left the students alone.

PAS in particular literally stayed in campus with the students. They have quite a number of sympathisers, they undermine the students' thinking, not to concentrate on the secular education, etc... all sorts and kinds of things. The students are subjected to propoganda from PAS. In fact they are subjected to this propoganda in the kindergarten, school, secondary school and university. They are listening to PAS, whereas in Umno, we (feel we) must not disturb the students.

As a result, students coming out now have been fully indoctrinated by PAS, they hate the government for no clear reason. Now we must change and counter PAS' propanda in the kindergarten, school, university, so they can hear us, then only have balanced view. They can make the decision. At the moment, PAS members abroad are meeting with the (Malaysian) students, keeping them away from the government and we try to talk to them.

Q: Are you saying that Umno will change its policy of not explaining to the students by making inroads into schools, universities?

A: Yes, it is true. Either we do that or we have to stop PAS from doing that. That is very difficult to do. They have lectures in the university, they have access to the students.

Q: There has been talk of an impending Cabinet reshuffle. Is it true?

A: I know my ministers very well. We hold in-depth discussions in each Cabinet meeting. I don't know why there is this impression that they are not performing. But if I find that they been have been given tasks and they are out carrying out the tasks, I am not a person who solves problems by sacking either (those who work) in the office or the Cabinet. If I find that they have not performed, and they are working with me, then it's my fault.

Q: So what you are trying to say is that there will not be a Cabinet

reshuffle in the near future?.

A: I don't think so, I don't think so. If I can't extract the maximum from each minister, I'm failing in my work, and if I fail in my work, you must see what happens in the whole country.

Q: We move on to a question on our education system. There has been a lack of English content in our education system due to the switch to Bahasa Malaysia. We are now producing graduates who don't master the English language, a language which is a very important tool for acquiring knowledge. What is your comment on this?

A: Well, it is not due to the switch to Bahasa Malaysia in the schools. When we switched to Bahasa Malaysia, we emphasised the importance of English right from the word go way back in 1960s when the English schools were changed to national schools. We emphasised the need to master two languages -- Bahasa Malaysia and English. Unfortunately, some people feel that you should neglect English entirely if you are a nationalist. If you are a Malay nationalist, then you should only learn Bahasa. The unfortunate thing is of course these people are also English speaking people.

But then the Malay students themselves think that if they learn English, they are not being nationalistic, they are not supporting the Bahasa. It is not the government's decision which was wrong. The government has always emphasised the learning and mastery of English and, of course, every time we say that we should have more English, the language nationalists who believe that to be a nationalist say you should only speak Malay. We believe that a nationalist is someone who has mastered all the knowledge and all the skills and is capable of contesting against the rest of the world. That is the true nationalist. But they think that just being able to speak Malay makes you a nationalist, and that is wrong.

Q: The reality at the school level is that of course we produce teachers who are already not good in English. So, how are our children going to master English? That's the reality. The theory you spoke about earlier, but the reality?

A: Yes, that is the reality because the teachers are also the product of ex-juniors. You see that to learn English is to be disloyal, to be unpatriotic. So, now we have to get teachers either from elsewhere if necessary or else we have to retrain the teachers in English.

Q: Will we have the political will to do this?

A: Political will we have. But of course, we will meet with a lot of language nationalists, who just want people to speak Malay and have no other knowledge.

Q: Are you just going to ignore these people?

A: You have to ignore these people because the future of our country is at stake.

Q: The president of GPMS (Federation of Peninsular Malay Students), Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim, in a recent interview, described you as a classic example of how important English is. He said that you are known throughout the world because you can put your thoughts effectively in world forums because of your command of English. You have anything to add to this?

A: Well, I must admit the ability to speak and explain things in English has served me very well. Because I can't very well depend on an interpreter because an interpreter cannot speak with the same force as you

can speak. So, the word does not carry through. So, that is why I feel mastery of English is very important because more and more we have to deal with other countries and we can't go to other countries and speak our own language because nobody is going to learn our language in order to understand us. We can speak to perhaps one or two people, but the world is not going to learn Malay in order to understand the Malays.

Q: Is this the reason you called on the Asean people to master English at the recent Asean informal summit in Singapore?

A: Yes, I think it is a good thing because even in the Asean meeting, we have to depend on interpreters. Whenever you have interpreters, the words do not carry the same weight.

Q: Let's move on to the developments in the world economy. This is the present scenario. The US economy is experiencing a slowdown and probably heading towards recession. The Euro is quite weak and the Japanese stock market is experiencing downturn as well. What's in store for Malaysia next year?

A: Obviously, if these three major trading partners of ours go into recession, we will be of course be very much affected. However, we are already studying the scenario as predicted in order to find how we can counter the effect on us. We may have to increase trade and even barter with some of our non-traditional trading partners.

Q: Are we going to do something about the stock market which seems to be struggling. There seems to be no foreign funds coming in. Are we going to put on more overseas campaigns and missions?

A: The stock market, in the first place, is not the best index of our country's performance. But the stock market, once it is opened to the foreign investors, then it will be subject to the interest of the foreign investors. The foreign investors, the short-term capitalists are not interested in the good performance of the companies that they invest in. They are interested in the capital gains. So, if they come in heavily on any counter that is where the shares will go up. When the shares go up, they can always dispose of the shares, take out their money and go to some other country. That is happening even in America, companies suddenly get their shares pushed up and then dumped and then they get into trouble.

So, we cannot depend on foreign funds because their interest is different from us. Our people want to invest in companies which perform, which give a good return. They are not just going in to buy shares, to push up and sell off shares. If you do that, you disrupt the whole economy. So, that is why the stock market cannot be relied upon anymore as an indicator of a country's performance. It is going to happen to every country.

Q: What is the projected GDP for Malaysia next year in light of the latest developments in the world economy, particularly in the US?

A: Well, we would say we should be able to achieve about 5.8 per cent, less than six per cent perhaps. But as you know, we predicted 5.2 per cent for this year, but we are going to perform more than six per cent this year.

Q: What would be the challenges to our economy next year, particularly in the property sector. Do you see any improvement?

A: In the property sector, it is not going to improve much because despite the downturn, they are still building. You see a lot of construction work going on. And as a result there are a lot of empty

buildings, but still they keep on building. Maybe they know something we don't know. But sometimes they do not do some proper study of the demand. And as a result, of course they lose out.

Q: Why do the banks keep lending to them when at the end the banks will be the losers?

A: Well, property is usually solid asset. They don't borrow the full value of the property. They borrow only a small fortune of the value of the properties, so the banks think that they can acquire the property at a cheap price. I don't know. I am not saying this against the Malaysian banks. It could well be.

Q: Certain people are saying that you and you alone make decisions for the country. Is it true?

A: Well, it is a comment on wrong perception. The opposition has always tried to label me as a dictator, as someone who decides and does not care about the views of others. But it is not me who makes the decisions. This is not the case of one man making the decision for everything.

I must admit though that throughout my career as prime minister, I have lots of ideas. Those ideas are put forward by me but it depends whether the Cabinet accepts the ideas or not. Then, of course they won't see the light of day. Those things people never know. They only see the decisions that are agreed to by the Cabinet.

Q: But Datuk Seri, they are saying it should be the other way round. The Cabinet ministers should forward their views.

A: Yes, they do. Cabinet members make all kinds of suggestions and these are debated by ministers from other ministries. Let's say, for example, the Minister of Agriculture would put up his plan, and then we will debate. Of course, I give my opinion and the other members give their opinions. And if they think it is going to work, they accept it and if they think it is not going to work, they won't.

It's the same thing with schools, education where the ministers come up and say. But this is a process between the Cabinet -- as you know, Cabinet proceedings are a secret. We don't go on film and sessions. Nobody sees how the Cabinet functions. But I can assure you, and if you ask the other members of the Cabinet, everybody speaks. Sometimes, I had to tell them that please, we don't have that much time. Some people speak several times when they claim a right to give their opinion. And I work at the meeting, last full length of time. If there is any paper we are not satisfied with, we postpone a decision on that paper, so as to enable the Cabinet members to go through the paper thoroughly. They may not be from their ministry, but they will have to read because they have to participate in the discussion. So, to assume that I was the only one laying down the law, of course, is to assume wrongly. And the comment that is made is actually based on wrong assumption that I am the only one directing everything. It is not so.

Q: People say you seem to thrive on crisis, and overcome crisis after crisis in your close to 20 years as prime minister. We seem to have a little crisis in padi and rice, especially in Kedah. How is the government going to overcome this problem?

A: At the moment, we have the commodity prices down, palm oil is down, rubber is down and now the rice is down. Well, rice is a problem of smuggling. Obviously, our border people are not effective in stopping the smuggling. Without the rice smuggling, there would not be a fall in the price of the rice. So, we will have to attend to it. We may have to be very

harsh. When we put people in a place for far too long, they begin to develop familiarity with the situation and the rice would be smuggled.

We have even put up a fence at our border. You know, when we put up the fence, there was a lot of outcry that this is not friendly, etc. But, actually, the collection of tariff went up more than the money they spent in putting up the fence. So, we need to have an effective border check or border patrol. There is obvious smuggling going on, the smuggling of rice into the country and now the smuggling of the petroleum out of the country.

Q: But 20 per cent of the rice is said to be smuggled all the time. Does that mean that we or Bernas need to import less? Is it going to change our situation of having to subsidise padi planting by RM100 million a year? Will policies on rice change?

A: Yes. Well, to stop imports because there is smuggling, condone smuggling, that we cannot do. We have to import because we have undertaken to import rice, we have agreement. Therefore, we should continue the import. At the same time, of course, we must strengthen the border, check points, etc, where there is a leakage.

Prevent the rice from being smuggled in. As for subsidy for the rice farmers, actually we are high-cost producers compared to our neighbours. So, our rice should have been sold at a high price and if we sell at high price, then nobody will buy our rice. So, the government undertakes to subsidise the price of rice, not in a big way but in a small way because we don't like to distort the market either. It is a tricky thing to do, as you see. But, it has worked over the years, and worked quite well. We are surrounded by countries with low-cost labour and the cost of production of rice is very, very low. And we cannot compete with them.

Q: Is it true that as far as agricultural technology is concerned, we are now lagging behind compared with some of our immediate neighbours, such as Thailand?

A: Well, I must admit some people are much better at producing fruits, for example. We are not that good. We have a choice. We can import all our needs or we can grow some in our country. Food security is a very important thing. We must have capacity to produce at least 60 per cent of our needs. In the case of rice, we fix it at about 60 per cent to 70 per cent of our needs deliberately in order to import from our neighbours. But, in order to ensure in times of need we have sufficient food, we must continue to grow food even if we are a high-cost producer. Our wages are higher than the wages of other countries and we are not too bad in terms of our capacity to produce. We are actually exporting fish and we are also importing fish.

Now we have developed new ways of rearing fish in cages in sea. We have identified many lagoons or sea for fish breeding. There is a lot of work being done in agriculture in order to improve production of food in the country and to reduce food imports.

Q: Datuk Seri, at one stage we were ahead of these countries in terms of technology. We even exported our technology in oil palm cultivation to other countries. Is it because we are putting greater emphasis on industrialisation that we are neglecting this?

A: Now, we are still ahead in terms of oil palm. If we had reduced the production of rubber, it is because the synthetic has eroded the market. So, the demand for rubber is actually mainly for latex and manufactured rubber goods like gloves. So, we are going with the market. The demand for palm oil is growing all the time, from two million tonnes we were producing about 15 years ago to 10 million tonnes a year now, five times more.

At the same time, of course, our neighbours and other countries are beginning to produce palm oil and this has caused a glut, especially as

many countries have also gone into production of soya bean and soya bean oil, which is quite cheap. This is something beyond our control. While we can regulate what we do in our country, we cannot stop other people from doing what is good for their country.

Q: In other words, market forces determine?

A: Yes, that is market forces. We have advised people not to cut down rubber trees to grow oil palm but people do not accept the advice. They think that they can make money. Of course they are suffering.

Q: Do you still see the future in rubber?

A: We have to have sufficient rubber produced in this country to meet our manufacturing needs. We are now actually exporting more manufactured goods than we are exporting raw rubber. In fact, we are buying raw rubber from other countries to meet the demand of manufacturing.

Q: Datuk Seri, on the line of succession, the frequently asked question by most Malaysians. Now, do you think that you have a duty on your part to prepare or groom the next prime minister because as it is now, many Malaysians, I am not saying all, but many Malaysians are saying that and it is the general view that no one can replace you.

A: No, I don't think so. Each prime minister is different from the other. His way of working, his style and his delivery ...so, it does not mean that if I am not around, therefore, everything will grind to a stop. Things will be done and it will be done differently. The only thing that will be common is Barisan Nasional, is Umno. We will continue the same kind of policies. Maybe slight improvements here and there. But, basically they will be the same policies. And I am saying that it is quite strange that on the one hand, people seem to condemn me as a dictator, on the other hand, they say, if I go there is no one else. So, there are contradictory views on this.

I really feel that whether we like it or not, one day I have to go. If I drop dead, I won't be around. Somebody has to take over and we have prepared our party for that eventuality. If I go, there are people who will take over from me. The succession is determined.

Q: You have said that this is your final term in office. Are you prepared to say now that you will hand over to your successor just before the next general election and allow your successor to lead the Barisan Nasional for the next election?

A: Whether just before or long before, it would depend on our assessment. But even if I am not the prime minister, whatever knowledge I have that I can contribute to the party, I will do so. I cannot just desert the party and leave it just like that. I have been the prime minister and party president because of the support of the party. And I have to support the party when I leave.

Q: In what capacity Datuk Seri?

A: Whatever capacity, maybe if they have to ask me about any question and I would be prepared to answer. Or they want me to do some work for an old man perhaps, I will do it if I can.

Q: Would you still keep people guessing as to when you will hand over to your successor?

A: The reason why I keep people guessing is that any hint I make about

stepping down or whatever, will have an effect on the economy and on the market. And I don't want my personal choice to have an effect on the market.

Q: Datuk Seri, you were saying that different prime minister have different style of leadership. Granted your background as a doctor as compared to your three predecessors who were lawyers, how do you differentiate your style and theirs?

A: Well, perhaps they would look more on the legal side, I don't know. They had the same objective but they approached it differently. And me being trained as a doctor, there is a certain method in dealing with problems that doctors must have, like when you see a patient, you immediately look at him to see whether he is sick or not, and what kind of sickness. Sometimes, you can even make a diagnosis by just looking at the person. But mainly, of course, we go onto the history, the science and symptoms, the laboratory tests and we check on everything and we conclude what the problem is. And then we figure out how to deal with that problem from our experience.

Q: In the New Year, we will have a new Attorney-General and a new Chief Justice. Do you hope that with these two appointments, the judiciary can restore public confidence as it has admitted itself that it has lost public confidence, and that there is acrimony between the judges and lawyers?

A: Yes, I think so because people must give some leeway. These are human beings and they have their weakness. They may be in charge but they are not angels. They are not people who are perfect. So, they have their problems. We need to have some flexibility in our thinking on the performance of our people. I have worked with these people who are very good and some who are very bad, but I think if you know how. all these people can deliver.

Q: You seem to be appointing women to key posts. At one time, you were quoted as saying that the reason why men are not appointed is because they are lazy. What are you trying to do here, Datuk Seri? By appointing women are you trying to give them more clout in the country's decision-making process?

A: I have no choice. These are the best candidates. And they have reached the top and they qualify and I don't see why I should deny them when no men are as qualified as they are. So, you have to appoint the person for his or her qualification, not because she is a woman or he is a man. When I say men are lazy, it begins with the schools and universities. In the universities today, 60 per cent over of the students, especially among the Malays, are women and they are studying serious subjects -- engineering, science, management, etc. whereas the boys are studying simple subjects which they think they can pass, such as Bahasa Malaysia, Islamic Studies, and Social Sciences. And when they come into the government, where are we going to place them? They don't have the capacity to deal with administration, while the women in the universities are studying serious subjects -- they are the lawyers, the doctors, the engineers and the scientists. They have shown that they can deliver, for example, a woman who had been sent to space saying that she is highly qualified. So, do I send an unqualified man because he is a man? No, I think it is not the choice that I would choose.

-- BERNAMA  
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