

Surviving in politics' vicious

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THE following is the full interview with Umno Youth leader Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Q: Datuk, congratulations on your re-election as the Tenggara division chief. How do you see your responsibility as a division chief in view of the current political developments?

A: As far as I am concerned, the Tenggara divisional election is very important to me. Lots of accusations were thrown at me in the last few months (leading to the election).

The ones that really hurt me were those relating to my division. And there were occasions, (mind you I'm also human) when I felt some of these allegations had affected my relationship with my constituents.

Like any other human being, when people question your ability, we also question ourselves. But no matter what people say about Umno, it is the most democratic political party in the world.

There is no party wherein somebody like myself, who is a Minister, will have to put my future and fate in the hands of the people at the branch level. It is not something that we should ignore or take lightly. We are answerable to the people at the grassroots and they will decide our fate.

So to me, the Tenggara divisional election was very important.

Alhamdulillah, despite the allegations levelled at me through poison pen letters and on the Internet, the members could evaluate my contribution to the division.

The top three positions in my division were not contested and there were also no problems in the Youth and Wanita elections.

Whatever I have contributed or sacrificed in the last two elections have not gone to waste.

We didn't use money and I hardly went down to campaign and we didn't issue poison pen letters and we didn't slander anyone. At the end of the day, we went basically on what we had to offer in the future and we admitted our weaknesses.

One of my weaknesses which I could not deny was the fact that I had been too caught up with national politics that I didn't spend enough time with the people in my *kawasan*.

Maybe other people don't realise it, but as Umno Youth chief, I have to look at problems in 165 Youth divisions.

I'm also a member of the Management Committee. I receive all complaints and appeals and I have to see what's happening in the Youth divisions.

That's something (spending more time in the divisions) I have to address. The Tenggara (election) gives me confidence. In that sense, you see me in a much better spirit.

Q: Could you tell us about the transformation process you've gone through from an ordinary party member and now as a Youth leader and a Minister?

A: If you ask me about my experience, it has not been easy. It is not as if I had it easy having contested at the branch level in Ledang, contested for the Umno Youth's exco post, deputy youth chief and the post of Umno Youth Chief.

I was thinking to myself, I am the son of a former Prime Minister. Financially, and in terms of comfort, I am quite stable.

As far as education is concerned, I have an occupation to fall back on. Secondly, in terms of political experience, although I'm young, at least I have gained experience through my father.

I always asked myself, what would happen to a normal person who wants to join Umno now and might not be the son of the Prime Minister.

He might not have the savings or comfort if something happens to him politically.

He might not have the luxury and what happens if his politics doesn't work? Where do we put this people in Umno?

And if there is no room in Umno for them, then we are going to lose out, which means Umno is not inclusive anymore. If it becomes exclusive, it becomes elitist.

And if somebody like myself finds it so difficult to survive within Umno, how about an ordinary person. How are they going to do that? So I have to look at certain divisions and we draw from experiences.

There are good examples ... for example my own private secretary, Razali Ibrahim, who contested in Muar (for the divisional youth chief's post), a lawyer by profession and lost to a clerk (Muar Land office junior assistant Abdul Rahman Aziz).

We cannot say Umno is so exclusive or so elitist that you have to be the son of a PM to get in because there are cases where that's not the case.

Why look at the Muar incident as something negative? Look at it (contest in Muar division involving Razali) positively where Umno is open even to a clerk.

Even with my background I find

it so tough going in Umno, what about an ordinary person ... So I don't blame some of the younger generation.

Q: You have seen your father's leadership. Do you think the role of a divisional leader now is different from the past in view of the present political environment?

A: I never had the opportunity to gauge the role of past divisional leaders. I saw at the level of my father, who was already then the president (of the party). So it is difficult to say that I know what it was like then.

But I think the politics of before and today is quite different in one aspect. In the past, they were quite reluctant to take up responsibility. They saw it as a trust and we didn't see people scrambling to become divisional chiefs.

In the past, during my father's days, when they were looking for someone to head a division or a State, the candidate was there in front of them.

The candidate argued with them why he should not be appointed, why he should not be given that post ... there was a lot of persuasion because to them it was a big sacrifice but now we see hundreds of people offering themselves.

In Singapore people are still reluctant to go into politics. The reason why you want to go in is important.

Q: Since you are the son of a Prime Minister, some people think that you do not know the meaning of "poor" and wonder how a leader who doesn't understand the meaning of "poor" could lead them to a better future.

A: We have to look at the decision of the Tenggara division. If the people who are closer to us, the people who determine our future at the very grassroots level, have no qualms in putting me back in the division, I don't think there is a problem of perception that I do not understand their grievances.

“ The candidate argued with them why he should not be appointed, why he should not be given that post. ”

There are nine Felda areas in Tenggara. If I am leading an urban division, that's different. But most of the people in Tenggara, not to say poor, are living in the rural areas. They will be my judge.

If people want to portray that I do not understand the meaning of “poor”, then you have to know who is saying it and where it is coming from.

If it comes from my own people in Tenggara, then I will take it very seriously but if it comes from the ordinary politicians (then you should know) who have labelled me

all sorts of things — aristocrat, elite, the son of the Prime Minister and super-rich — this is normal in politics. I will accept it. At the end of the day, it is not giving me any problems.

Q: Some parties have been saying that you are where you are today

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because you are the son of a former Prime Minister. What is your comment on this?

A: There are pros and cons ... being the son of so and so, the expectations are high.

If you do not come up to the expectations, out you go. And there have been sons of Prime Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers and those with positions and yet they do not survive the politics of the day.

For me to say that it was an easy route, I can tell you clearly, it is not an easy route. I never got it on a silver platter.

It was not parachuted down to me. So give me time to prove it ... at the end day, this thing has been labelled on me ... this label was created since I contested at the branch level.

I am still around surviving and I think it will be there forever.

I can't help myself being who I am. As long as Umno is democratic enough, as long as Umno allows the people on the ground to decide the fate of the candidates, whether you are the son of a former Prime Minister, Minister or Deputy Minister, if that mechanism is there, I think we should let the members answer that question.

But politics today is vicious, politics today, I don't know why, seems to have very high stakes.

Do you really think being the son of so and so, people are going to look up and take it into account? I do not know how many people really remember my father.

I do not know how many people remember the sacrifices made by Tun Razak Hussein and Tunku Abdul Rahman.

You could see on the day we held a remembrance for Tun Razak, how many people attended and how many people actually remembered him.

If you don't remember the man that you accuse me of hiding behind or the man that I am trying to take that advantage from, what advantage do I get?

Q: You have been seen to have given too much attention to sports than the development of youth. Is this a fair judgment of your performance in the Cabinet?

A: That's your fault. I totally blame it on the media. I don't think it is a fair perception.

The media puts too much emphasis on sports. On many occasions, I attend youth functions and if you look at the media yourself, not much is highlighted on youth development.

How much space has been given to the Malaysian Youth Council or 4B Youth's activities?

Whereas you have dedicated pages for sports. And, of course, the public is into sports.

I try to look at this positively in a sense that if sports is given publicity then I will try to relate that to youth development.

If Roslin Hashim does well in Japan, I will get him and the Sidek brothers to go down to the grassroots to bring badminton to the grassroots, inevitably it will be the youths.

Role models in sports could be a good example. And what you have been hearing in the sports section lately as a result of my decision is something which I also try to cultivate in the youth — that is discipline.

Recently, I called the Anti Corruption Agency into my Ministry. I want to see transparency, reduction of politicking, increased trust and responsibility in all sports associations.

All that we have to curb. I'm quite consistent with what we want to do with the youth.

There must be commitment, undivided feeling of responsibility in what they do. And also discipline. I'm the sort of guy, if we can't change, then we have to use whatever there is ... beggars can't be choosy.

So if sport is being highlighted,

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I hope to find an occasion where the Ministry is not looked at as the Sports and Youth Ministry because sport development will affect youths.

And if we can tie up youth development with excellence in true sports and role models, it will be something we can change.

That is not easy because we are dealing with the Ministry which has a certain mindset and I have to talk with my officers; they all have their own compartmentalised responsibility.

Q: But you have been criticised for giving too much emphasis on sports than Umno youth?

A: It is easy to criticise. We need to find the right formula to balance the two.

Let things answer for themselves. This is a learning process. We are young and we got to go through a learning process. It is easy to criticise, but at the same time what solutions do you have?

The same thing with the Opposition. They criticise the Thomas Cup, Sea Games. I have never heard the Opposition come up with concrete proposals on how to develop youths.

I have never heard them once suggest to me on how to improve Rakan Muda or any other youth programmes.

So in terms of criticism and balancing the two, it is not something which is easy to look after ... anybody will face the same problem when they have to juggle the activities.

Q: Some say you are too nice to be a youth leader.

A: Do I need to do the things that they do to stay there?

There are certain things ... I'm not nice all the time. There are certain things that I feel strongly about and if you ask my Exco members they would know what took place during closed-door meetings.

ing at others.

I want to see how many can accept the challenge to ensure the success of the programmes at the grassroots ... this a joint responsibility.

As the leader, I want to look at myself in the mirror and identify my weaknesses and rectify them so that the party will not break up.

But I don't want our people to overreact which can destroy our movement and I have seen that

nario? Will we achieve what we want?

Why do you think we can press ahead with the New Economic Policy? It is because people were awakened by the 1969 riots. It took a few lives before the people could realise that we needed such a policy.

It is the same thing now. I am worried ... we have seen the Al-Maunah episode, what happened at Kampung Medan and Suqiu but people are still not waking up. Peo-

them, different from existing ones.

Q: And the younger generation also think that there is nothing attractive in Umno Youth. How do you address this issue?

A: It will depend very much on the target group that we are talking about. We have students, young professionals and teenagers.

Programmes for teenagers could be just activity-based while the young professionals probably want

There are certain things that I feel strongly about and I don't mince words and I will find the culprit until *lubang cacing* like those who betray the trust of the party, betray the Exco and betray our struggles.

Some have got their own interests ... but that I can tolerate but there are certain things that I would not compromise on. And those I think my Exco would understand and I'm not that easy going in that sense.

But I do give people space. They make mistakes, everybody makes mistakes and some make the same mistakes twice.

Q: Some feel that you are too lenient and because of that, certain people are taking advantage.

A: Agreed. The main thing is for me to take a line of communication with them so that they will not stray from their path and they will realise that I wasn't nice and have positive aspects and characteristics.

But one thing I realise over the years in Umno is that we cannot order our members to do things. They have to do it voluntarily because party work is voluntary anyway.

They win not because of me ... They are there on their own right too. They have to answer to the people who voted them ... and to be fair to you, criticism from the delegates towards them exist and they come and see me about it.

I tell my Exco members that it is not my fault as they voted them in.

So it's a learning process. I think there should be some form of check and balance. There are ways to remind our members.

We should not reach to the extent of demoralising them because I

happen during the time of Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Thamby Chik and Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

It cannot happen again. Because we got a lot of work to do as a team. But believe me, I have the programme ... I know my movement, I know what I want to do.

Those who want to follow, they could do so ... those who refuse, will be left behind and people can judge for themselves.

Q: How are you going to defend yourself against these criticisms?

A: You are talking about rhetoric. One of your questions today was the comparison between myself and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Where is Anwar today? What is Anwar willing to do to preserve the movement? He was willing to go to the streets and destroy the party.

So as the Youth leader, I look back at the past ... look at the Youth leaders who were once idolised.

Datuk Harun Idris was once the most influential but today how many visit him?

How many people have talked to him? This is just an example. To me its relative. I might not be the flavour of the month but I look at this in the context of 40 or 50 years from now.

People are not going to see what (Umno Youth Exco member) Dr Shamsul Anwar Sulaiman is going to say about me ... as at the end of the day the individual is not important, they will remember whether Umno Youth is destroyed or remains intact for them to carry on after me.

For me, our work is nothing less than working flat out from now until the election in 2004.

And I hope with the new appoint-

ple are not united by it.

So what do you want Umno Youth to do? To pressure the Government to do what? Do you think the Malay Action Front has achieved anything? I don't think so. I don't think they have achieved anything at all.

I am very proud of my Exco members because they are under a lot of pressure. But they hang in there and remain intact, they give me a totally free hand to deal with this and I couldn't do this without their support.

We have to be clear on our direction and objectives ... I will not hesitate to tighten up on these. Our struggles have to be clear.

If not, we can shout and scream at the top of our voice but the people on the ground will not know what we are shouting and screaming about ... at the end of the day we don't get anything.

Those are some of the reasons why I am quite cautious about the party being a pressure group.

Q: But Umno Youth is also seen to be rather reactive than proactive. Do you agree with the view?

A: Yes, I agree. It is not just Umno Youth.

A lot of it (the cause) is internal and its the party's problem. I think we are too caught up with our internal problems that we don't even have time to look at the bigger picture which is very much needed.

If we are bogged down by internal problems, everyday thinking about posts, appointments, political assassinations, finding faults in the party, how are we going to look at other things?

We do what we can on current issues.

For the last three weeks, I have

a part in policy making and be part of voicing their concerns.

As for the students, some want their welfare to be looked after.

From the feedback we have received, most students are not happy as their welfare is not being taken into account for example scholarships are not coming on time etc.

Not many of them are so purely politically inclined that they want to reject us completely.

There's one group that is politically inclined — these are the ones who are concerned about the ISA but this is nothing new as they have been a part of student movements for a long time.

Q: What is Umno Youth doing in terms of getting closer to the rakyat like engaging them in dialogues to explain Government policies?

“ I will decide what the activities are and I want to see how many Exco members can keep pace with our activities ... I want to see how many are willing to go down to meet the grassroots, especially those who have been fingerpointing at others. ”

believe that there is an opportunity for them to better themselves.

But if I feel they have gone overboard, I will point it out to them.

Q: But can a person like you be suited to the rough and tumble of today's politics?

A: I don't know, I hope so. I don't want to be known as Mr Nice Guy all the time.

But is it wrong to be nice? There is enough hatred and anger out there. That it might be refreshing to have somebody who smiles.

You can swear but that doesn't mean that I will just forget what you have said ... I have proven that.

Some people said bad things about me in the division and who has been embarrassed now? It is not me. I can ask people to write poison pen letters but in the end the Tenggara division would be in chaos.

I let the delegates prove it. Now who dares say I'm not accepted in Tenggara?

There are Exco members who said I'm weak and that I have no direction in my leadership.

Now, I have decided that for the next three years, I will decide on the direction of the Umno Youth.

I will decide what the activities are and I want to see how many Exco members can keep pace with our activities ... I want to see how many are willing to go down to meet the grassroots, especially those who have been fingerpoint-

ments at the state level, our agenda will be accepted ... I will not entertain anymore excuses of not being able to do things.

Q: Umno Youth has been known as a pressure group in the past, but not any more. Why?

A: Why? I think there is enough pressure out there. Whatever we do, the most important is our objective.

We don't want it to be just rhetoric. The situation now and then has changed.

In the past when you wanted to talk about Malay agenda, no Malay would betray the agenda for the sake of their political interest.

The case of Suqiu, for example. Talk about the issues surrounding the 18 demands touched on the privileges of the Malays but because of their political interest, certain quarters among the Malays were willing to ignore that.

One of the issues raised was on the equal rights to religion whereas Islam is the official religion of the country.

Pas has not made a stand on that. They supported the 18 demands without actually reading what they were about.

These people are willing to say to this pressure group, Suqiu, for example, don't worry, Umno is split and the Malays are split ... and you think you can gather 100,000 people to prove that you are a pressure group in the current political sce-

been busy trying to sort out the happenings in the divisions and this is how we have survived all these years.

Without consensus I don't think Umno could have survived this long. But today, it is much more difficult looking at the political scenario and internal situation.

I think the more important issue is how we are going to bring in the young professionals into the party than trying to be pro-active.

So proactive, in a more constructive sense, yes, we are more than willing to listen to ideas and suggestions.

But if you want me to say things which are being harped on by the Opposition, that's not me.

If that is what you mean when you say I am not proactive, then I am not proactive.

Q: There is a feeling that Umno Youth is for the elite and the younger generation is having problems getting close to the movement. What's your comment?

A: It depends which is the target group. I agree the 20 somethings might have problems because the present Exco members are above 35.

This is something I am fully aware of and something which I need to address.

One way of addressing it is by looking at this group as a real target group.

We must have a programme for

A: Sometimes, you talk to me as if all the problems have to be solved by Umno Youth alone.

What I mean is why has it to be Umno Youth alone, why don't we ask what the supreme council and State Umno are doing?

You should ask the others the same question ... it is as if the problem of getting the young people to join Umno lies only with Umno Youth.

The problem is not just something that Umno Youth alone must address. The change must come from the party.

There are weaknesses in Umno Youth which I am not happy with and have yet to be addressed. One issue that needs to be addressed is what we have to do to get closer to the people.

At the moment we still have not done enough and I think that needs to be done. Ask me this at the end of the year and maybe I can give you a better answer.

Q: If you were the Umno Youth leader during Abdul Rahim and Anwar's time, would your style be different?

A: It will be different, very different. I am like this not because I'm a nice guy.

Q: Is Umno Youth obliged to fulfil all directives from the top?

A: It depends on the seriousness of the issue.

If you want to label me as someone who adheres to all the PM's directives, that's fine.

In certain cases I listen to the Prime Minister but if I feel so strongly about it then I will have other options.

What's the point of raising issues which could destroy the party? I will rather resign than allow the party to vanish in 2020 ... what is the meaning of all these, the moment the party doesn't survive, there won't be anything for us to give to our children.

Can you make a comparison between myself, Zahid and Rahim? What is the difference between the allegations that we are obliging to PM's directives as compared to what Zahid did.

What Zahid did was irreparable ... during Rahim's time, there were people who were ashamed of wearing Umno Youth's uniform and at that time the Opposition was not strong.

If the same thing happens today, I don't think we can survive. If I am now accused of statutory rape I cannot survive.

I can tell you with a clear conscience that I am not corrupt, I don't drink, I'm not a womaniser, I'm a good Muslim, I will die in Umno and I will fight for Umno as long as the party wants me ... this is from the bottom of my heart.

Q: Umno Youth is seen by certain quarters as an elitist movement because previously its strength was derived from the ordinary folk like farmers, fishermen, small businessmen and the lower strata of government servants. Umno members have been asked to return to these group of people, be close to them and win their hearts. How much has the Umno Youth succeeded in this?

A: We are doing that now. Whether or not it is successful is too early to say.

There is a realisation that you have to go back to the grassroots. I think there's no reason why we cannot do that. If we look back to Dr Shamsul, his father is a Felda settler.

He is a doctor and a Youth Exco. I gave an example just now where in the Muar division a clerk was given a post in the division. This means the background of the individual whether you are an aristocrat or a settler, doesn't really matter.

If we have been accepted by the delegates and given the opportunity and trust, it is compulsory to full-

strengthen the party. Is this being worked out by the three movements?

A: This is my pet project. I have been harping, screaming and shouting because I am quite tired of finger-pointing by certain Umno members.

Lately, fault finding has become the order of the day ... the finger is being pointed from one to another ... from Supreme Council to Umno Youth, then Wanita and Puteri Umno ... at the end of the day nothing is done.

I will not compromise on that. I will not start pointing fingers and put the blame on anybody.

I have to state from now that I will not allow Umno Youth to be used as a punching bag everytime there is a problem.

But Umno Youth must carry the trust that is placed on the shoulder of every Exco member and division youth head. If they carry the trust properly I think nobody will start targeting Umno Youth.

Q: Has politics changed your life?

A: Yes, life is not like before.

Q: Is that something you wanted and anticipated when you first joined politics?

A: I enjoyed the last two months ... it has been the best thing in my life honestly, it is proving that people are wrong and proving that you can do it.

The support from the family and friends are important ... they are the ones who tell you to go on and once they lose faith in you, then you are gone.

I don't tell my children to go into politics because it has to be in you.

My father never told me to go into politics ... it has to come from you and you will know ... Some Exco members realise it is in them and there are some who realise it is not in them.

Everybody must judge themselves ... as the Umno Youth head, I have judged myself and I know that I can do it in the next three years.

Whether I will excel, history will judge me. As far as I am concerned, I know my strength ... I know what I can do and I know my Exco's strength ... and I know we can make a change.

I enjoy what I am doing ... what upsets me sometimes is the petty things and personal agenda ... some of them are so concerned about their personal interests and use the party to achieve their vested interests.

fil that responsibility genuinely.

We are trying to make it easy for those who want to serve. Those who deliberately do not want to serve, will be gauged ... we will make it clear to all State Umno Youth heads who will be appointed that our prerequisite is people who can work.

We will fight for the interest of

everybody — young professionals, students, fishermen and settlers — if they require our attention, they are considered as our target group. We want to get closer to the people.

Q: Party elections are a chance for members to pick an echelon of leaders who command high respect, hold high morals, and are trustworthy and efficient workers. Does the new line-up reflect this?

A: Seventy per cent of the new leaders are new faces. There is no reason to be so alarmed ... based on our interactions, they could be guided.

The problem is a lot of people think that as soon as you become a Umno Youth division head, you know everything and you have to do more.

Youth means you are young... because of that, we are inexperienced and we need guidance. We need guidance from the experienced leaders like the Prime Minister, Assemblymen, party veterans and Supreme Council members.

They also need guidance from me and my Exco and that's our immediate responsibility.

Q: The people gave their judgment of Umno in the last general election which was not encouraging to the party. What the party requires now is a consolidation of strength and good coordination from Umno Youth, Wanita and Puteri Umno to

Q: How do you divide time between politics and family?

A: They have to be understanding. I spend a lot of time with my Exco families especially those I care for.

Those who entered contests, I make sure that their families are behind them.

In my case, I divide time to be with my family.

Q: How long are you going to stay in politics?

A: As long as I am needed ... and when I immediately see that I am not needed, I will gladly go ... without any regret or fear whatever.

To the younger ones who want to enter politics, my advice is you must plan and strategise as though you are going to be in politics forever.

But in your heart, you must always be ready to give it up tomorrow because I have been through it and I have seen enough.

When you are down, nobody will care for you ... people forget your good deeds.

So whatever you are doing now — you get yourself crazy for posts, rallying support for yourself ... in the end, take my father and grandfather as examples, you have to live with your conscience and your family.

Look at what happened to former Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar? Where is he now? People have forgotten him.

Q: What is your ambition in politics?

A: You must have ambition. In politics, you cannot say that you do not want to go any higher.

When you go into politics you have to aim for the highest position. Why? Not because of the position ... so that you are able to make a difference.

When I was a branch leader, my scope everyday was at the branch. When I was the Umno Youth division leader, I spent time daily with the Ledang Youth division.

As you look up, then you will realise that you can make more of a difference. If you want to go higher, you must be able to touch more and that's the satisfaction of going into politics as opposed to any other professions.

I can serve my nation and people as a lawyer, I will survive very well and probably my family would be happier and have a lot more money ... but in terms of satisfaction, you may want to be involved in nation building in a bigger sense. So if that's the satisfaction, it will guide you to keep going and not many people can cope with that. Whether you are going to survive or not, it depends on your goals and objectives.