

Suhakam still needs beefing

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EXCERPTS of the interview with Tan Sri Musa Hitam:

Q: Please sum up your two years at Suhakam.

A: Yesterday (April 22), we had our last meeting to finalise our annual report. We also finalised the proposal to amend the Suhakam Act. It is being sent to the (Foreign) Minister, and it's for the Government to reject or accept it.

We do feel that there is a need to polish it up ... things like membership, terms and conditions, recruitment of staff, role of the commissioners.

We have made a recommendation for the two-year term to be extended because before you know it, our time is up. We have done a lot in two years but given a slightly longer time, it may be better.

The powers of enforcement had also been looked at. As of now, Suhakam is a recommending agency, and not an enforcement body. The suggestion has been put forward to make it more effective and authoritative.

Q: What is your assessment of the new team?

A: It's a reasonably good team. The chairman (Tan Sri Abu Talib Othman), I know personally. When I was Deputy Prime Minister, he was Attorney-General and I worked quite closely with him.

It's good to have a chairman who has a legal background and is apolitical.

Because when I made statements, some of you put up question marks: "What is Musa's political agenda?"

I feel that this was a handicap to Suhakam. I was its chairman and anything I said was interpreted as partisan, and for my own self interest.

Secondly, I am sure they (the commissioners) will be good contributors because human rights cover such a wide scope that anyone who has experience in administration and public service would be useful.

There's going to be a comparison (with the old team). I wouldn't worry too much about it. But they ought to be given a chance to prove themselves.

I can assure them that the most difficult issue will be political and civil rights. By its very nature, it's controversial, it evokes passion.

Assuming there aren't any major political issue, they will have a good time! It was our good luck that we ran bang into the Anwar Ibrahim/*reformasi* issue and we looked at it purely from the human rights point of view and made the statements we needed to make.

We thought it would take years before people knew what was Sw

hakam, but thanks to that, it is now a household word. I think we have established ourselves as an institution that is here to stay.

Q: The Government sometimes seem to view Suhakam as Western-oriented and irresponsible.

A: I take issue with anyone who says that. On certain issues, like the Keras Highway report, the Prime Minister said these (our views) were Western ideas. The PM has very strong views. I took it easy.

What we would like is for the authorities to have a good hard look at our report it's their privilege to accept or not. I feel that the police are using it as a reminder.

I don't want to get involved in the Western, Eastern, Asian debate. Our responsibility is to follow the Act and do our job without fear or favour.

However strong the objection, it's no big deal to me. I accepted that. The fact that the issues evoke reaction, it's good. It reflects that we are a dynamic society that is undergoing the political democratic process.

Q: But some non-governmental organisations think that Suhakam

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is toothless.

A: Tell me which NGO can be accepted as being full of teeth? It's normal, it's not because it's Suhakam. It's toothless in the sense that we are not an enforcement agency. Even if we were an enforcement agency, we will still be criticised for one thing or another. The Government says say we are front for the Opposition, the Opposition says Musa Hitam is an Umno man. I have no problems with this.

Q: You said you were handicapped by being an ex-politician. Tan Sri Abu Talib also faces a handicap of his own, what do you think of his appointment?

A: Come on, we are not perfect. That's the privilege of those people to speak (their views of Abu Talib). I am only saying that I am reasonably happy that it's him, for the strength of his legal background. I can find fault with him, of course, but that is not fair. I must give him all the backing and wish him well.

Q: You were seen as outspoken but Abu Talib is seen as conservative.

A: I am not saying these things. As for me, I am what I am. I am not mainstream, I am a frank person, I say what I feel. I will sing my piece.

If I am given a job, I take it seriously.

But I don't want to compare myself with the incoming chairman, he has his own positive attributes.

On political issues, they will have the same problems as us. Most of the substantive work we have done are in the social and cultural aspects, like facilities for detainees in lock-ups.

We had a workshop on young detainees, and we came out with recommendations and we feel that the recent announcement on allocation to improve lock-ups is the result of that.

We also sent our recommenda-

tions on the handicapped to the Government. We took up the issue of gender discrimination and the Government amended the Federal Constitution to abolish such discrimination. We like to feel that these are our contributions.

Q: Why don't you want a second term? Were you offered?

A: I was never offered . maybe even if I had kept quiet, the Government would have dropped me anyway! As to why, it's quite simple. Suhakam was too politically charged because of me. It's better for Suhakam to be led by someone who is apolitical. From a personal point of view, it's quite a nuisance

up to make it authoritative

where everything you say is interpreted as having a political agenda. And really, I have had quite enough of that.

Q: People say that the new Suhakam team will be a 'pro-Government' one.

A: I am not prepared to label them the new members as much as the old members. Their stance could be pro-human rights even if it coincides with the Government's stance. But as we were interpreted as being anti-Government, I don't think it's fair to brand them at this stage.

Q: Do you have other plans?

A: Some years ago, when I sued a writer over an article and won, I said it was the best retirement present I had. My late son was there and there was a beautiful picture in your newspaper (*New Straits Times*). Of course, one of your top men at that time, I won't say who, wrote and said: "Don't believe him".

Then this position (Suhakam) came along, and they said again, "There you are, he is still interested". Now, I am out again, so let's see what they are going to say. I have no plans.

I think at this late age in life, my concerns are three: physical, mental and financial well-being.

So much money has been knocked out, but I have sufficient physical and mental well-being. I am still invited to speak at seminars internationally. Many invitations, the problem is that it's non-paying! But that's no problem, I have always been able to adapt.

I am living in this beautiful house which I bought for a sum which can now only fetch a semi-detached house (in an affluent area). If it is too expensive to maintain, well, I move out to a more modest house.

Q: How do you keep so trim?

A: I just came from a birthday lunch, and I ate so little! A little rice, lots of vegetables, and fish and chicken and that sort of thing. And every morning, a big glass of soya drink without sugar. My wife makes it herself.

But once in a while, I do indulge. *Nasi lemak* or *laksa*, we enjoy ourselves on Sundays when my wife cooks.

I believe in living moderately and intelligently, and to laugh at yourself, and laugh at the world, not all the time but some of the time.

My son and three grandchildren all love swimming, and this pool is really used every week, and I go in with them.

And I play golf. I am not a golf-

drunk fellow. but I play often enough to hit straight. If on a hot day, you see a man running on the course carrying an umbrella with the buggy behind me, that's me!

Q: What's your handicap?

A: My handicap is me, Musa! I am a very basic golfer. You know golf is a personality game, you watch a man playing golf and you know the personality.

I had such a lovely godfather in politics, Tun Sardon (Jubir), he played awful golf, God bless him. It reflected on his personality, not

A: Surely, not in EAM! As DPM, I left and no one came after me.

Q: But they left you.

A: Yes, they left me. Some of my so-called friends say we will always be behind you, I have learnt what that means. It means that when you are in trouble, they are so far behind that you can hardly see them.

Q: But things are better now?

A: For me? Ah, I have had a beautiful life, people always seem to be nice. When I go out, people

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that he was awful person, but he was everywhere, he couldn't keep still, he was always doing one thing after another, his golf was also like that.

Q: You don't ride horses?

A: No, but my wife does, she is crazy about riding. I decided to join the riding fraternity, and was the president of the Equestrian Association of Malaysia for five years. The PM had said that this was the first time the association had a president who does not know how to differentiate the left leg and right leg of a horse.

Q: Are you still the president?

A: No, I have left it. I left not because of anything, but it was enough. I should not say this but the culture of our people and in a lot of countries, is that once they have a post, they don't want to let it go.

Q: Why?

A: For glory? If you are the president of EAM, you can sit next to PM when he comes to an event. I may be cynical but it's true. But of course, some people do believe that they can contribute and they want to stay longer.

Q: Sometimes when you leave a post, people come after you.

come with a smile to shake hands. I was just queuing up the other day at the MidValley (Mega) Mall with my wife and son, and a number of people came to greet me.

When I am stopped for speeding, I am profusely apologising and they are profusely apologising. These are little things that make you happy.

Q: What is your thinking about Dr Mahathir?

A: He is an amazing leader — it's the dogged determination to see things done in the way he sees is best! And Sept 11 has changed his standing. His stakes have now climbed.

Sept 11 was very traumatic for the world. And the international community looks around for examples in tackling this problem. And who's the leader? Dr Mahathir.

At domestic level, the non-Malays especially the Chinese worry about extremism in Islam. They look for someone strong, and they turn to Dr Mahathir.

The Malays, the bulk of them are moderate who want stability. They too look to Dr Mahathir.

Given these factors, Dr Mahathir is riding high. He is the envy of a lot of leaders.

'I don't have the dogged determination of Dr M'

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Q: He seems undefeatable.

A: When a person has stayed long enough, he will go through all the ups and downs. And when he's down, he never gives up. That's the personality of the man. Dogged determination. I gave up, I **am** not made of the same political mettle.

Q: Some people see Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as not being in a strong position, and there was the Pas poll creating some keen interest among the leaders in Umno.

A: If Umno members fall for Pas poll and create tension, Umno doesn't deserve to be what it is. Pas is a political party and it will use all sorts of tactics. Umno should be able to handle it.

What matters is the handover of power in the party. When, I don't know. Give him (Pak Lah) a chance, one PM can never be the same as the other PM. No successor to Dr Mahathir should even think of trying to be Dr Mahathir. You can emulate him but your style will be different.

If the next man is Pak Lah, so be it and the party should give him a chance. But this is academic as the PM is still there.

Q: Nice men don't seem to survive in Umno.

A: I don't know who is nice, or if you regard me as nice. I am not a politically savvy man, and so I was out. Anwar was supposed to be very politically savvy. and look where he is. I do not know how to define Tun Ghafar Baba. And Abdullah Badawi is now said to be a nice man. The real test is his ability, let him prove himself.

Q: After 1999, the Government seems to be trying to tackle the negative things like cronyism.

A: All these branding (of things), it's very subjective. It's used or misused by whoever who wants to. What's important is for the party to realise that the population is no longer passive, uneducated and unsophisticated.

Q: Pas/Keadilan seems to have lost support.

A: It's difficult to find issues that evoked so much passion as in 1999. The Opposition has been on the defensive. After Sept 11, Pas bungled by their **jihad** call and the demonstration outside the US Embassy. They scared the wits out of moderate Malaysians. They don't seem to be able to put their act together.

The DAP has siphoned itself off Pas, but the Chinese are not turning to them.