

29 DEC 2002

Sakaran-Interview

SPECIAL INTERVIEW WITH SABAH YANG DIPERTUA NEGERI

By: Azman Ujang and Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Dec 29 (Bernama) -- Although he has been holding the top post of Sabah Yang Dipertua Negeri for eight years and before that he was Chief Minister of the state known for its frequent political upheavals, Tun Sakaran Dandai remains a very humble person.

In fact, his first words upon entering the guest room of his private residence in Likas here were to apologise for being slightly late for a special interview with Bernama, which was scheduled to begin at 3pm on Tuesday.

Dressed in bush-jacket and his trademark songkok, the 72-year-old leader, who is highly respected by the people, frankly admitted that it had never crossed his mind that he would one day be appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri.

Several times during the interview lasting more than an hour, Tun Sakaran recalled how he had started his career as a clerk under British rule in the District Office of Semporna, his birthplace in the east coast of Sabah bordering the waters of southern Philippines.

Apart from establishing a name in politics to the extent of reaching the pinnacle as the Chief Minister in 1994, Tun Sakaran is also known as a Muslim leader well respected for his personal efforts to build mosques and religious schools.

On the last day of 2002, he will end his tenure as the 8th Yang Dipertua Negeri after serving for 54 years in various posts, including as a federal minister.

In the interview, he also quoted a verse from the Quran enjoining Muslims to work, love their work and duty, to be sincere, honest and patient because good practices would be rewarded.

"I think my success in reaching the top is (because of) my unrelenting effort in finding ways to help the people," he said.

He also expressed his high regard for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his success in stabilising the political situation in Sabah, which allows this state to enjoy progress like other states.

Tun Sakaran also touched on an important event in the history of Sabah politics, the moves to form Umno which came to fruition in 1991, which led to the dissolution of Usno, the party formed to struggle for Sabah's independence through the federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Following are excerpts of the interview:

Question: You have gone through various experiences as an ordinary citizen and then became a political leader before being appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri. Could you enlighten us on your duties as Yang Dipertua Negeri?

Sakaran: Our experiences are sometimes too long a journey. But all these are the blessings of God, never in my dreams did I harbour hopes of being appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri.

This struggle is a very long one with twists and turns. I could discharge this duty because of the trust given me by Dr Mahathir. Thanks to his confidence in appointing me as a federal minister, then Chief Minister and Yang Dipertua Negeri. I have learned along the way, from the bottom as clerk, "ketua anak negeri", district chief and then joined the struggle for independence.

Previously there were not many highly educated people. But because of the efforts of our teachers, parents and religious leaders, I managed to learn a lot from them on matters concerning religion, law, administration and society. Life was tough then...I also knew how to fish, do farming with friends. I was poor, every day my parents had to work hard. I enrolled for night school, after that we also carried out cultivation.

It is this upbringing which has given me the discipline to face the tasks, including that associated with this post. From the determination to work under British colonial rule, I gained exposure and learned a lot. Uncompleted work at the office was taken home, just to make sure that work was implemented.

I was one of the chiefs from Semporna called to discuss the fight for independence, formation of Malaysia, and this experience came in handy when I was appointed to various posts. I do not have exceptional capabilities. It is only that I work hard and is committed in carrying out the duties entrusted to me.

I know that the duties of Yang Dipertua Negeri differ from those of a clerk, officer and Chief Minister.

At the Istana there are officers to help out in the work. Work at the Istana is the peak of state administration; when there is a policy that needs consent, the Yang Dipertua Negeri will perform the duty as required.

The duty also encompasses the appointment of the Cabinet, Chief Minister, appointment of religious bodies. I am also required to attend the Conference of Rulers' meeting every three months. Other events never cease. I am always busy.

Question: What is it that you hold dearly to all these years?

Sakaran: First of all, it is the blessings of God and preparation to face whatever tasks based on knowledge, religion, and a positive feeling to approach anything with patience, also to always follow current developments. But the important thing is to be guided by the Quran which enjoins us to work, love our work and duty, to be sincere, honest, patient. Good practices will be rewarded. This inspires us to always do good.

I think my success in reaching the top is through unrelenting effort in finding ways to help the people.

Question: You have seen how the state government has changed hands in Sabah from the time of Usno, then Berjaya, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and Barisan Nasional (BN). In your view, is the political situation in Sabah stable now?

Sakaran: As we can see, maybe during the period just after independence we were united under the Alliance government but we were finally split, leading to the birth of Berjaya, PBS. All these parties have been tested by the people and our leaders. And Sabah was caught in disunity and this was detrimental to the people because it was difficult to bring development. But we are thankful to Dr Mahathir for his views and for bringing Umno to Sabah. Dr Mahathir wants the people of Sabah to be united and be developed so that they could enjoy development like that in other states.

So, efforts to form Umno were continued. They finally came to fruition.

I did not expect to be given the responsibility to lead Umno in Sabah. I have been loyal to the leaders from the start. In the beginning, Sabah Umno was led by (the late) Tun Mustapha and Tun Ghafar Baba and then I became the liaison chairman. The work was not easy, the situation was not easy then because we were in the opposition in Sabah.

Thank God, with the support of federal leaders, we managed to be united and leaders of Usno, Berjaya and PBS were willing to enter Umno.

Then during the 1994 election campaign, Dr Mahathir made a pledge to develop Sabah and I also voiced the people's aspiration for development to be brought to the state if Umno and BN were supported. But that was not easy, plenty of work had to be done day and night, non-stop. Even this house became a headquarters. Our leaders were gathered here. I am thankful for getting help from my family. My wife helped to prepare food and drinks.

We subscribe to the principle of hard work, we plan the future of our race; there must be a feeling of love for our country, race, religion and this is what I have been holding dearly to.

From my days in Semporna until now, I have been used to mixing with the various races, helping each other and showing mutual respect.

Question: Are you satisfied with the progress of Sabah?

Sakaran: We are grateful to God. This is our promise to the people to bring development to them under the new Sabah concept. The development in these nine years, if compared to before, is very different in terms of education, schools, colleges, universities. So is development in the health aspects in various places. Roads, basic amenities and business opportunities have also improved.

The government has spent so much to provide the facilities, but it is really up to the people to make efforts, to take the initiative.

There are many schools but their achievements differ. The government has provided all this and it depends on the participation of parents and the spirit of teachers.

Business opportunities should be seized. There are many Bumiputera contractors who have succeeded, and we hope they will continue to progress. I will be satisfied if there is success. The government has made big allocations but if the people just take it easy, surely there will be no results from these efforts.

Some are developed but some are still backward, lacking understanding of the spirit to develop. So, I hope the government will have more officers to guide our people in business, especially in the rural areas. Hopefully, with supervision, whatever is planned will continue to bring success. Those who are still behind should be given guidance.

Question: Now, let's retrace the events of 1994. At that time, you had held the post of Chief Minister for just eight months before being appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri. Did you feel then that the appointment had come abruptly?

Sakaran: The fact is that I accept whatever views and advice offered by the leadership. This has been my principle from the outset, confident about and loyal to the leadership.

Of course, I am grateful for being appointed to this post because going by my ability and age, the more challenging work of bringing development to the people should be handed over to the second echelon people who are ready.

Question: I would like to ask your philosophy on what we call "power". You once held the most powerful post in Sabah, the Chief Minister's post. Is there any truth to the perception of certain people that if one has too much power, the power is easily abused?

Sakaran: Such situations have happened many times and have not happened. From time to time, whoever the Chief Minister is, there will be occasions when there are too many plans, requests and applications, especially in an era when there are many parties. So all these applications

prompt us to find ways to fulfil their requests. We derive our power from their support. So, to repay their deeds, we try to find ways to help them and this is also the advice of Dr Mahathir, that when holding the reins of administration do the best you can to fulfil what you have pledged.

From time to time, this situation changes; the change to the system of rotating the Chief Minister's post, two years for each Chief Minister. Two years he may just have been able to plan and then he has to be replaced.

Question: What is your personal view on the rotation of the Chief Minister's post? Is it beneficial in terms of political administration or otherwise?

Sakaran: I think both. There is political stability, there is fairness for every race, so every race feels it has been given a chance, not marginalised. No victimisation and the Chief Minister helps his own people and also others. Maybe it is because of this rotation system that unity has strengthened, politicking has been reduced. All leaders can focus their energy and resources to bring unity for the people.

Question: In your opinion, what are Dr Mahathir's special contributions to Sabah and its people?

Sakaran: I think Dr Mahathir is a leader that God has given to our country. We can see that Dr Mahathir is a visionary leader. In Sabah, for example, we know that is not easy to unite the people if you cannot see far ahead. For example, the Chief Minister's post is a move with a long-term view. According to the constitution, the party with the biggest win should take the Chief Minister's post. But this had been tried before. The Chief Minister then developed his area only, and this caused some places in Sabah to be left behind.

Dr Mahathir saw and knew all about these and that's why he is a leader with vision, for coming up with the system of rotation for the Chief Minister's post.

Question: What is your advice to the younger generation which did not have the opportunity to experience the hard times of the colonial era and the struggle for independence because they were born after independence?

Sakaran: We should be thankful to God. When we were under British colonial rule, there were only a few people with high qualifications and some were illiterate. This is important to our race. The difference is that we were colonised for 100 years and Sabah has been independent for only 39 years but we develop education for the younger generation because they are our future leaders. Big allocations are given for education in the hope that they can intensify the development of our country and strengthen unity.

It is our hope that the allocation for education would be put to good use. We were impoverished while under colonial rule. I was also poor and had to go to a school with thatched roof, barefooted and with only a pair of clothing per year. Now, we can choose the school we want to send our children to. Some are sent overseas.

Previously, we had to sweep and clean up the school premises, do some farming and exercise before entering class.

There were not many job opportunities under colonial rule. In 1948 in my class only four people got jobs. Nowadays there are many job opportunities, so the younger generation has to be grateful for this. The hard and bitter struggle for independence was not felt by the younger generation. We hope they will make the best use of the opportunities in

order to be useful citizens to the country.

Question: What are your feelings as you are about to retire?

Sakaran: I am grateful to God and I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr Mahathir, all other leaders in the country and the people for their support for and confidence in me. In my capacity as Yang Dipertua Negeri, I have managed to join other leaders to bring unity, and although my contributions may be small, I have nevertheless contributed to the state's development, including building mosques and surau.

My appreciation also goes to the government for helping to maintain security...we can see that previously the East Coast was prone to robbery and piracy. I am thankful to the federal government for showing concern on security in Sabah, and the police, military and facilities are all adequate for us to enjoy peace.

Fishermen no longer live in fear of pirates. The entry of immigrants has also been checked. The peace in Sabah is an attraction to investors and tourists because they are comfortable with our security situation, prosperity, culture of mutual respect, unity and tolerance.

Questions: What are your plans after this?

Sakaran: All experiences can be used, the years left will be used to do religious deeds, like helping in religious development programmes and ensuring that the younger set could improve their achievements.

I would also join my friends in welfare work and always pray for the continued well-being of Umno and BN leaders and the peace, unity and prosperity of the country.

I hope parents, teachers and leaders would continue their role to help improve the well-being and status of the race.

-- BERNAMA

AU JS YBY