

15 OCT 2003  
Mahathir-Interview  
TEXT OF INTERVIEW WITH PRIME MINISTER

PUTRAJAYA , Oct 15 (Bernama) -- Just two weeks before Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps down as prime minister, his aides continue to be deluged with requests from the local and international media to interview him.

Yesterday, shortly after opening the OIC Expo 2003, a six-day trade exhibition held in conjunction with 10th Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit here, he granted an exclusive interview to Bernama at the VIP room at the expo site.

The interview, according to his aides, would be the last exclusive media interview to be given by Dr Mahathir before he steps down on Oct 31 after 22 years in office.

The 70-minute interview was conducted by Bernama chairman Datuk Kalimullah Hassan, Editor-in-Chief Jaafar Hussin and Executive Editors Datuk Azman Ujang and Yong Soo Heong.

Following is the full text of the interview:

Question: Thank you very much Datuk Seri for taking time from your busy schedule to agree to this interview with Bernama. I would like to go back to June 22 last year when you shocked the nation by announcing your retirement. Had you not been interrupted by the understandably emotional members of the Umno Supreme Council, what was it that you wanted to say?

Answer: Nothing except to explain that I would be letting go of all roles in the party and the government, nothing sensational, I have already said enough. So I wanted to explain that I had stayed on (till then) because I wanted to put the party in order. In 1998 I had already planned to step down but unfortunately in 1998 we had this problem with the Deputy Prime Minister and the economy was not doing well and I thought it was wrong for me to step down. So I stayed back. Why I was making that statement last year was because I thought I had put Umno back in order, Umno has regained its strength and popularity, the economy was doing well, so it was time for me to step down. That was all that I wanted to say.

Q: But why did you choose that platform to make that announcement?

A: Well I thought that if I don't make a public announcement, people will not think I'm serious. If I make a public announcement especially at Umno caucus which I regard as the most important forum for me then there is no going back. If I make the announcement I have to carry it out. I didn't want to tell people because if I tell people they are likely to tell me don't resign yet. In fact I did tell Tan Sri Khalil (Umno Secretary-General) that I wanted to resign but he said no. no..don't resign. I feel that if I tell people quietly that would be the reaction, so it's better for me to make a public announcement so that I cannot retract and if I retract then my credibility would be gone.

Q: So what about the timing of your resignation. Had you been allowed to continue your speech that day, is it at the end of October this year that you would step down?

A: No, no, no. If I had been allowed it would have been my last

official function that day itself, I would step down that day itself. I considered of course to continue because there the appeals, including the appeal from Pak Lah (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) who wanted me to stay. If he had said no and that he was ready to take over and all that I would have stepped down.

Q: So that would have been the important announcement that you would have stepped down that day itself?

A: Yes, had I been allowed to continue. I was already prepared to step down that day itself.

Q: But did you expect such a reaction from the people?

A: Well, I do expect some reaction. In fact as you know I myself sometimes failed to control my own feelings and my own emotions. In fact that was what happened, I told myself I musn't be emotional about it. I must make a very plain statement then I step down. But I was not able to control myself and I myself broke down and then that created the reaction and I thought that people were very upset ...therefore I had to accept the appeals that I should not step down then. I thought over during the night. The next morning when I met the group that came to see me by then I had decided that first I had to two meetings, NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) and OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference). I would stay back for these two meetings and then I would step down.

Q: The post of prime minister is a very powerful one. But you don't seem to be obsessed with power and power doesn't seem to get into your head, so to speak. Can you explain this.

A: Power or authority is necessary in order to enable you to carry out certain things. Had I not been prime minister I would not be able to do things. I had many experiences where perfectly good suggestions were turned down as not possible or foolish or whatever. But when I became prime minister then I can carry through my own suggestions. So I became more effective. That power is used in order to do things for the country, not for yourself. If you do things for yourself people will hate you.

One of the things I was taught when I was small was that I should not overstay. If I go to a person's house you must get the feel whether people still want you to stay or not, so don't overstay your welcome... so it's the same with being in authority. If I overstay my welcome and wait until people hate me then I step down, then it won't be very nice.

Q: But Sir, there is something else which is very important, the next general election.

A: There will be general election and general election. If we finish one election we'll have to wait for another ... you'll never step down.

You step down at a time that would give the new leadership sufficient time to to take over and to lead effectively, so I thought that it was the middle of the period that we were supposed to be in the government, five years. So last year in June I thought it was half-way and that sufficient time for the new leadership to lead the party and of course I have already told myself that I would help (in the election campaign).

Q: President Pervez Musharraf of of Pakistan says in an interview with the New Straits Times that you have almost become public property and that

you cannot retire from on the international stage because you have a lot to contribute to the Muslim world. What are your comments to his comments?

A: If I am required to do anything that is productive, yes I will be willing to contribute, not in an official position because I will not be able to have the kind of authority that I have in Malaysia as prime minister. So the only contribution that I can make is maybe ideas, I feel that my contribution even in Malaysia is in terms of ideas ...not so much authority as ideas. Authority is necessary in order to implement ideas. Without ideas authority is useless, so that's my contribution.

Q: You would leave office in about a fortnight but you have mentioned about "unfinished business". Can you share your thoughts on what are they?

A: There will always be unfinished business. If you were to wait until you finish all your business you will never step down. So I am resigned to the fact that I have to leave even if I can't finish the business and hopefully the people who succeed will carry on.

Q: After you retire definitely you'll have more time to yourself and your family. Will you be able to smell the roses, so to speak, and be more accessible to the ordinary people, like at Bintang Walk or KLCC (Kuala Lumpur City Centre shopping complex next to the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur), minus your bodyguards?

A: Even now I have been moving around. As you know I go to KLCC, I go to Bintang Walk. There are bodyguards but they are a distance away, they don't interfere, lots of people come up to me to shake hands and all that, so I feel that I'm less like most other leaders who are physically separated from the people. I like to be an ordinary person, I like to do my own shopping, I like to sit at a coffee table and drink coffee in public. I like to enjoy that kind of normal life. When I became Deputy Prime Minister somebody told me that now I cannot go out . If I want to buy anything they will bring the goods to the house and I can choose. I said no, no way I'm going to do that. I want to live like an ordinary person. I want to do my own shopping, I want to be free to meet people, but sometimes the security people are worried, I can understand they are worried but Alhamdulillah (thank God), in Malaysia we are not that violent, we meet people.

Q: From now on, the man in the street will see more of you?

A: Well, I'm quite sure ..I will meet them, I've met more people than anybody else even while in office, you know every Raya (the Hari Raya open house), I meet tens of thousands of people.

Q: You have also been the world's most widely travelled prime minister. Why is this so?

A: You have to meet friends, you have to make friends in this world. You don't make enemies, our policy is not to have enemies, even though we don't agree with their policies. that is their business. As far as we are concerned we want to be friends with people. And when you are friendly with people, we get a lot of benefits. For example, we are a small country, say we stand for election in the United Nations, we have to have friends to support us. So I go around and meet people. Not only meet them, where we can be some help, we can help that's why we created the Malaysia Technical Cooperation Programme in order to be able to contribute. We will gain

something then give back something.

Q: So do you plan to travel just as much or do you plan to, for example, write a newspaper column after you retire?

A: I don't know but I like to travel. I have been invited to many countries, they don't care whether I'm prime minister or not, they want me to speak. Some of it I will attend. As far as writing a newspaper column, I don't to tie myself down to any regular job. If I feel like writing I will write.

Q: Contrary to your very strong posturing, we have been told that you are actually a very shy person. But you have demonstrated nerves of steel, are very vocal on many issues and are very much at home even with large crowds. How do you reconcile that?

A: Yes, when I small especially I was very shy, I could not mix with people. I feel that people don't think much of me. But I learnt to overcome this. I still remember when I was a small boy, I was afraid of dogs. And I ran away and of course when you run away, dogs will chase after you. But when I stopped and looked back at the dog, the dog stopped. So I realise that you have to overcome some of your fears, some of your shyness if you want to do something. And to speak, I wasn't able to speak before but I had to because it is my job. You know my Malay is still very much Kedah Malay, I can't speak very flowery Malay, or English for that matter. But since that is part of my work I had to do it. After sometime when we do things repeatedly we become better and better.

Q: The turning point was when you became a politician?

A: I was feeling very strongly about British colonialism and all that. And I used to think why people do this and do that and one day I asked myself what did I do. And then I could write, I could speak to my friends and because of my strong anger over colonialism for example, I feel that I must overcome my shyness, my lack of confidence if I am going to be successful.

Q: You have been called names by certain leaders. Paul Keating (former Australian prime minister) called you recalcitrant, also Madeleine Albright and James Baker (former U.S. Secretary of State), Al Gore (former U.S. Vice President). Were you hurt when these comments were made about you, and secondly why did not not react tit-for-tat?

A: I wasn't the first to criticise them. I very seldom criticise the Japanese or the Chinese or the Vietnamese because they don't criticise me, they don't criticise Malaysia. It is they who run down our country, they seem to have a feeling that we are inferior to them, that they should tell us what to do, that they should tell us we are doing this thing wrong, that thing wrong. So my reply was that they are just as wrong as we are and if we don't tell them, they will get away with the belief that they are right and we are wrong. You have to tell them. You know I told about the Europeans. European history is full of wars, they fought each other constantly, and they took other people's land without regard for people who were there. Th Red Indians were actually wiped out. In Australia, the Aborigines have been killed and their land taken away. So you have to tell them ..look you are stealing other people's land. But we read most of the reports that come from them and they never mention that they have to take

away other people's land. We have not taken anything. Just like I told the Chinese (China), you are very close to us you have never conquered us but from 8,000 miles away the Europeans came and conquered us. What have we done to them. They wanted to trade but their idea of trading is to conquer the country and take everything for yourself at the cheapest price possible.

Q: When you assumed office in 1981, you were labelled a Malay ultra and many non-Malays were apprehensive about you. But after 22 years, support from non-Malays is tremendous as evidenced in the last general election. Do you think you are unfairly labelled?

A: Labelling is a political gimmick. When you label a person and everything he does is linked to that label. So my opponent, maybe the PAP (Singapore's ruling People's Action Party) they didn't like me, so they called me a Malay ultra...what I was doing was nothing extreme. I was just asking that Malays should be given fair treatment. Not an extreme demand but because I was labelled an ultra everything I say and everything I do appeared to be extreme and this label sticks to me because of their persistent use of the term ultra and of course they say I'm against the Chinese and Indians. The Chinese and Indians do not know me, they have read about me being reported as an ultra so they thought that it is going to be terrible that they have this man as prime minister. Over the years, it took time, initially they distrusted you but slowly I showed them I am fair to everybody..I'm fair even to people who go against me...if you look at the Cabinet, members of the Cabinet are people who were against me. Datuk Abdullah Badawi, he was one of Tengku Razaleigh's group. He tried to topple me and today I'm promoting him as my successor, Rais Yatim, Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, Syed Hamid Albar, all these people were against me. I don't have any grudge against people.

Q: How do you describe your relations with the non-Malays during your 22 years in office as prime minister?

A: Well it's a gradual process. Initially they distrusted me, over time they find out that I'm not against them and that I want to be fair to them. But I must also promote the interests of the Bumiputeras, the Malays in particular. When I do that it must be a balance. Sometimes I scold the Malays and people know and sometimes I scold the Chinese and Indians if they do something that is unfair to the others. I have been very fair and very balanced in my criticisms. I think over time they realise that I am not against them. In fact I was ready to help them.

Q: There had been suggestions in the past about non-Malays assuming higher political office in the country, like another deputy prime minister's post, if there is one. What are your views on this and do think this can happen?

A: It can happen. I have already said there can come a time when a non-Malay might become the prime minister. But there are qualifications of course, that he is someone accepted by the Malays. If he is not accepted by the Malays then it is difficult for him to become prime minister simply because the Malays are in the majority but it is not impossible. If a person becomes very concerned about the Malays and for their cause and be fair to everyone, I think the Malays will lose their fear of a non-Malay becoming prime minister.

Q: But would you say that one day politics in Malaysia would not be

based on race?

A: Yes it is possible if everybody enjoys the same status. There is a complaint that in the public sector there's not enough non-Malays but if you look at the private sector, the number of Malays is very few. You have to balance.

Q: 2020 is not to far away. What are you thoughts on the creation of a Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian race)?

A: Slowly we will lose our fear of each other. But we have to make sure that everybody enjoys the same position, wealth as everybody else. I have always pointed out that in a multi-racial society, if you find one group not only poor but also of one race, the poor are just of race, then you have things disgonally opposite. If you draw a square, and you put the Malays, Chinese, Indians and others in it (and factor in the question of race and wealth), then you will find that the Chinese are not only Chinese but they are wealthy, the Malays are not only Malays and they are poor, then those will sort of the difference (between them) and we cannot find them coming together. But if you remove the wealth factor, the Chinese are as poor as the Malays, and the Malays are as rich as the Chinese, and when you remove the economic factor, then you have only Malays and Chinese. And if we all behave like Malaysians, understand each other's culture and all that, and we can speak a common language, I think eventually they will come together.

Q: So this is why we have affirmative action like the NEP (New Economic Policy)?

A: Yes, there is affirmative action and it has succeeded to a certain extent because during the (1997-98 regional financial) crisis, there was no fighting between the Chinese and the Malays.

Q: Judging from overwhelming outpouring and show of affection for you in the SMS (short messaging service) and also in Bernama's website, Malaysians don't seem to think you have overstayed your welcome.

A: Well, when a person is away, then you seem to have a longing and you remember only the good things. This is contrary to what Mark Anthony says "the evil that men do lives after them, The good is oft interred with their bones". But actually this is not true. When a person is dead, you will remember his good qualities. But when he is alive, especially when he is to be elected, you don't know that (Arnold) Schwarzenegger (new California governor) was a thug or anything like that until he stands for election, then all the dirty things are dug up. This is human nature. I accept that.

Q: It has been 40 years since Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia. However, residents from Peninsular Malaysia are still subjected to certain immigration procedures from these two states. Do you think that it is high time that they did away with such rules in order to strengthen national integration?

A: I think that our leaders (in Sabah and Sarawak) will eventually come around to accepting that we are all Malaysians. We (Peninsular Malaysians) don't discriminate against them. Sarawak companies are doing well in West Malaysia, they are given contracts, they are also functioning well in West Malaysia. But West Malaysian companies, of course, there are some

difficulties there. But it is slowly eroding, not as bad as before.

Q: Do they think their fear about West Malaysians swarming all over them is justified?

A: Well, they still have that fear. It may not be justified but that they still have that fear. We have to wait for them to overcome that feeling.

Q: You standardised the time when you came into office. Even Singapore followed suit. But states in Malaysia don't have a common weekend. Do you think we should work towards having a common weekend?

A: Well, we should. The idea of weekends is new. Before the British came here, we didn't have any weekends. But the British came here and introduced Sunday as the weekend. Obviously, Sunday is a kind of Christian holiday. And the reaction to that was for the introduction of Friday as the weekend for Muslim states which were not in the Federated Malay States. But actually in Islam, there is no weekend. We don't have a weekend. We have a day of prayers or congregation. Jemaah means congregation. It is clearly stated that after your prayers, you go about and do your work. But because of the idea that Sunday is a Christian holiday, some Muslims think if you pick Sunday, then you are doing something Christian, they should do something Muslim. But actually in Islam, there is no weekend. The weekend is an artificial holiday, and we can have it any day, maybe Sunday, maybe Monday or whatever. Even if we have it on Sunday, it has no religious connotation, anymore than Malaysia having a holiday on Deepavali means that that Muslims are celebrating Deepavali. They are not although we (Muslims) may visit our friends but we have not become Hindus because we have a holiday on Deepavali.

Q: So we should have a common weekend?

A: I think we should have a common weekend. Already Perlis and Johor have a common weekend. But PAS is just waiting for an opportunity to pounce on any issue and make it a political issue. And this is why in many instances we can't do the right thing because we have political problems, not religious problems. PAS will make an issue of this in the next elections and say that we have become Christians, we now celebrate Sunday as our weekend and therefore we should not vote for people who take Sunday and not Friday as their weekend.

Q: You have been perceived as anti-West in view of your strong views on a number of issues. Are you really anti-West?

A: I am not anti-West. I have got lots of friends among them. But when they do something wrong, I feel duty-bound to criticise them as much as they criticise us. If they feel that it is their right to criticise us, I feel we have a right to criticise them.

Q: At the WTO (World Trade Organisation) meeting in Cancun, we managed to gather the support of developing countries to block unfair policies proposed by developed countries. What should we do next?

A: We should have our own agenda. We should not have said "no" to their agenda and then stop (at that). We have to have our own agenda, our own programme which will help to redistribute wealth more equitably (among

developing countries).

Q: Would you say that what happened in Cancun was Smart Partnership in action among developing countries?

A: In a way, it is. For once, I am sure most of these countries will come under tremendous pressure after this.

: You have been credited with starting the national car project in 1983. When we started, there were doubts and some even said that Proton had no pedigree. But Proton has developed and is ready to take on the global market, especially in niche markets. In the process, we also established an industrial base in the country. Could you comment on this?

A: Well, we have lots of ideas. Some succeed, some failed. Like all businesses, you can't guarantee that it is going to succeed. In the case of Proton, we succeeded. But in the case of Perwaja Steel, we failed and people said, "How stupid we are" because we suggested having heavy industries. Yes, it failed, not because the idea was bad but because people didn't know how to manage. In the case of Proton, initially it didn't do well and then I had to bring in the Japanese to manage it and the Japanese put it back on track and today it is doing well. It is the same with Perstima, the tin plating company, it went through several phases. The same happened to the cement plant in Langkawi. These were the start of the heavy industry projects that we had. So you can see that some have failed, some succeeded. Of course, those who did not like us said, "How stupid they are to start a steel industry?" It's not because we are stupid, some of us don't know how to manage.

Q: Would you say setting up Perwaja was a mistake?

A: No, Perwaja is one of the few that failed. It is not really a mistake. It is easy to make a decision to do something. But if you hand it over to the people who are supposed to implement it and they failed, it is not the idea which is wrong, it is the failure of management. For example, there was a time when somebody tried to corner the tin market. They started selling tin at such a low price that people who were buying tin and we know they don't have the tin. We went in to buy the tin at this low price. Unfortunately the people we asked to buy the tin bought more than we asked them to do. In the end when we came to the delivering the tin, of course, these people do not have the tin that they have sold to us. And do you know what the London Metal Exchange did? They said "No, you didn't have to deliver." It is a contract and they said you don't have to deliver and we lost money, we lost money not because we were stupid, but because the London Metal Exchange said they don't have to deliver on their contract.

Q: How do you reconcile the failure of Perwaja when demand for steel was at its highest then?

A: You see, a steel mill has to run efficiently because even if there is a demand but if the cost of production exceeds the price that we sell, you still lose money. These people who first ran Perwaja were actually operating Perwaja from KL (Kuala Lumpur), they don't even go down to the ground, they don't understand mills, steel production, they don't understand the process, so they don't know how to bring down the cost. They were producing steel which they couldn't sell and the plant was breaking down. You do not know how to run a plant because all these plants require

some skills in the management in order to make it feasible. If you don't understand the technology, you are not going to succeed. So that is what happened to Perwaja.

Q: Datuk Seri, after more than 40 years of public service, you must have had some regrets. Can you tell us some of those things?

A: Yes, I have already said that my regret is that the Malays whom we tried to help have not made use of the opportunities we created for them. They said they have no funds, we created a lot of funds, they said that they have no opportunities, we created a lot of opportunities, they said they have no premises, we built premises for them, we taught them how to do business but they do not have the culture. Nobody succeeds if you have the wrong culture. And they think that since we are going to help them, then they don't have to bother, they just take whatever is handed over to them. Or they sell the opportunities given to them. Now recently we say that they can borrow without having collateral, these small industries. And they come to borrow without even a business plan, without even any proposal as to what they want to do with the money. They just come to borrow the money. And we know that they cannot make use of the money because they have no idea what to use the money for. Even if you want to borrow from a bank, okay the bank won't need a collateral but they must know how are you going to use the money in order to earn money to pay back. But the people think that since the government now says you don't have collateral, they come to the bank and say, "I want to borrow so much money," but when asked what they are going to do with the money, have they done any feasibility studies, what assets have you got, how are you going to go about this, what is your previous experience, they say, "Ah, don't ask us all these questions, just give us the money." It is not possible.

Q: Don't you think, Datuk Seri, you are selling yourself short because a lot Malays have improved. Are you setting too high a standard for yourself?

A: I think they can do better. But I must admit there are some Malays who have done very well. Very, very well. And we also helped them although they are doing well because if a person knows how to do business, you should help them. You should not face obstruction along the way. Sometimes they get problems, sometimes the bureaucrats, we should intervene and help because we want to see Malays and other bumiputeras also becoming rich. Otherwise there is disparity where the very rich people are non-Bumiputeras. Although there are Bumiputeras doing business, they are actually holding small businesses only.

Q: Since the day you took over as Prime Minister, would you say there has been a drastic improvement, maybe not up to your expectations? As you leave at the end of this month, would say that you have done something?

A: Well, I must say that there has been success. For example, when I started, one of the things I wanted to see was there should be names of Malay executives who have been promoted or have been appointed because in those days there was none, not a single one. But today we not only see Malays holding high posts, drawing good salaries but they are also successful in business. To that extent, I am happy with their performance.

Q: Your administration is pro-women. Women have made great strides in the government and they are now three woman Cabinet ministers. In the civil

service too, we have a number of woman heads of departments and ministries. But the private sector is lagging behind and we hardly have women CEO's, say, for companies listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

A: There has been an improvement certainly compared with before. In the private sector, we have a lot of women who are very successful, maybe not as successful as the few men who are very prominent but they are successful. There are (woman) executives. In many businesses, they even head foreign companies. I think they are doing quite well and they are going to do better because now 70 percent of the students in universities are women.

Q: Our ringgit is still pegged at 3.80 to the U.S. dollar and many people are watching whether we should lift selective exchange controls after they were imposed five years ago. Do you think the peg is still relevant now that things are less turbulent?

A: You do not lose anything by pegging but you can lose something by allowing for a free float. The speculators might come in. The manipulators might come in. With a fixed exchange rate, people can plan and be sure that at the end of the day, they are not short-changed. But with the floating rate, we have to hedge, and hedging costs money. So why do we want to increase the cost of doing business by floating the currency? Until we find that we are not getting value from our money, we should stay with the fixed exchange rate.

Q: What is the progress on the use of the gold dinar for trading among Muslim countries? Do you think the gold dinar can help strengthen economic and trading links among Muslim countries?

A: Yes, we are working on it. It's not easy to convince people. They are very familiar with the U.S. dollar. We say the U.S. dollar has got no intrinsic value, just a piece of paper on which some numbers are written. That value can be appreciated or depreciated. Today, the U.S. dollar is 30 percent than it was just about a year ago. So paper money can change. But gold, it has a value in the market. The least you could do is to sell it in the market to somebody who could use it as jewellery or whatever. But you can't sell pieces of paper to gain anything. Basically they are no more value than toilet paper. So that is why we have promoted the dinar. Not for internal use, not for transaction within the country but for the purpose of trading. Today we are using the U.S. dollar for the purpose of trading because the U.S. dollar can be exchanged for our currency at 3.80 and it can be used for exchange with the euro at such and such. So we use the U.S. dollar as the standard reference currency. But if we change the U.S. dollar and use gold, then gold will not move up and down too much. So we have a much more stable currency.

Q: So you think the gold dinar can be a strong alternative to the U.S. dollar?

A: Yes, yes, we can begin, We are beginning to work with a few countries at first to show that it can be done. When we show that it can be done, then other countries will get on board.

Q: On this important issue of education, one criticism of our public sector-run education system and the national schools is that they are too Malay in character. The government has made a significant change with the

use of English for teaching science and mathematics in stages. Many people want the government to put more English content into our educational system.

A: The national school has been converted not just to a Malay school but converted to an Islamic school by the teachers, by the religious teachers insisting on all kinds of things, which are Islamic in nature. As a result, the Chinese and Indians do not feel comfortable and they don't want to go to these schools. It is not the government's policy, it's just done at that level. Then you know they don't even allow children to play or wear shorts. The Saudi football team even wear shorts (but) the children playing football in the national schools cannot wear shorts. It is quite ridiculous. But we have now tried to put a stop to the slide to the extent that it may become in the end a religious school rather than a national school. We provide adequate religious education in the schools and there is no need for the "other things" to be introduced. As far as English is concerned, we find that in order to learn science and mathematics, in Malay, we find that we have to have good text books and we must be updated all the time. Science is not a static thing. So who is going to provide the text, who is going to translate all these new findings into Malay. It is just not possible because to translate requires three qualifications -- you must be able to be fluent in English, you must be fluent in Malay and you must know the subject, you must be an expert in the subject, and there are not many people who can do that. It's easier for us to use English and gain access immediately to all the literature and all the scientific findings in English. So that is why we introduced English. And as far as fluency in English is concerned, our worry is that our foreign affairs officers now are not capable of playing a role internationally because they lack the command of English. They went through the Malay education system. Although we asked them to learn English, they neglect the English. The Chinese and Indians, they learn three languages -- Chinese or Indian, Malay and English and they speak English much more fluently than the Malays for the Malay children believe that this is Malaysia and why should we learn any other languages which of course deprived them of the asset that will be working in their favour. This must change and I think parents accept now that they have to acquire English. And in modern times, everybody should have a command of at least two languages, their own mother tongue and another language.

Q: During your 22 years as prime minister, there were two challenging periods -- one was in 1987 when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah mounted a challenge against you and the other in 1997 during the financial crisis. Is it true that very few people stood by you during those times?

A: I think in 1987, and as you know, I came through although Umno was made illegal. At that time, there was a split. I think we managed to rebuild Umno and get the majority of the people to back Umno so much so in the 1991 elections and 1995 elections we won with a bigger majority. Although there are a few who are against me, the majority was for me. In the case of the currency crisis, the people were confused. I had to work with a small group of people. And we had to make a decision within that group after I was able to convince people who were not convinced that currency pegging and controlling movement of capital would not damage Malaysia's reputation and economy. But I managed to convince a sufficient number of them and in the end, this small group which was working with me, this is the MTEN (National Economic Action Council) committee, they agreed and we were able to implement despite the fact the Governor of the central

bank and his deputy resigned. Somehow or rather we pushed through. Once it begins to work, people will come round thinking our way again.

Q: Do you feel very lonely at the top?

A: Quite often I do feel lonely because I think of something that is not conventional. You see when, well I don't normally talk much about this, when I became prime minister, the first thing I asked is that we should examine everything we are doing to see whether they are the right things to do, they are giving results or not. If they are not giving results, then we should change. If they are giving results, we must see how we can improve on the results, everything that the government is doing. So we changed many things. For example, before our government decided that it should not work with the private sector. We examined this policy and we find that it is not productive. So we decided on Malaysia Incorporated. Then we looked at the performance of government departments. We tried to improve government departments. Government companies, for example, did not do well. We decided to privatise. And there were many things which were not conventional, we were sometimes ahead of many countries, ahead of the rest of the world. Privatisation actually started in Malaysia more than any other country if you care to look back and find that we were among the first, if not the first in privatisation. That is the way we do things. Of course, people sometimes doubt whether we can do it or not. So at that time, maybe we feel a little bit lonely but we win people over.

Q: The elections are just around the corner. As in the previous elections, there would be some new faces. What would be your advice to potential candidates and to those who would not be chosen?

A: Well, before I was embarrassed to tell them that it is time to step down because they can turn around and say "What about you? You haven't stepped down." Now I have stepped down and I can tell them that "you can stay on only for so long. You can't stay forever, you can't stay until you die in office. You must give a chance to others. You must remember that you come up because those people helped you out. Now it is their turn and you must help them, not just step down but also help the incoming candidates to win. That is what I think we should all do, I'm going to do that. I need to help the elections even though I am not a candidate. I am not going to be a candidate.

Q: On that score, quite a number of Barisan Nasional leaders who began at around your time have not indicated their retirement plans. Any advice for them?

A: It is up to them. I believe that after sometime, you become stale, you are burnt out. And I think your constitution may not be as good as the younger generation. I benefited from the fact that Tun Hussein (Onn) decided to step down. I didn't push him down, he decided to step down. If he hadn't stepped down, then I wouldn't have an opportunity to do anything. So even if you have done well, you should be prepared to accept the fact that somebody may do better than you.

Q: The reaction from Malaysians all over the world to your retirement, as you saw for yourself in the United States and Monaco recently and in the country, was very emotional and people were moved to tears when they think of you leaving. Datuk Seri, if you had one wish or dream for Malaysia, what would it be?

A: I think I suppose people will know me, miss me and all that. But I think the best they can do is, of course, make a success of Malaysia, either by supporting the government, or if you are given the opportunity to do something, do it well. If you are doing business, you do good business, when you are in the government, you (must) work very hard to bring about the right results and all that. I think that is what we do to society what we owe to society.

-- BERNAMA

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