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It's time to walk the talk

TEXT of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speech to the Cambridge (Malaysia) Foundation in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday.

WHEN I stood before Parliament soon after taking office to move a motion of gratitude for the services of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed to our nation, I noted that the greatest challenge that I would face as his successor would be to manage and build upon the success that he left behind.

I did not inherit a country in turmoil. I did not inherit war, deprivation or crisis. Instead, when Tun Dr Mahathir handed over the duties of governance, he made sure that I inherited success.

As someone who worked closely with him, especially in the last few years of his administration, I am well placed to pay tribute to his foresight, determination and resolve.

When Malaysia reached a sudden and pronounced nadir in 1997-1998, the challenges seemed insurmountable. We were confronted with an external economic environment that was unforgiving and manipulative.

At home, the Government was challenged politically, raising concerns about instability. But these challenges were met head-on by Tun Dr Mahathir. He did not shirk from having to make brave decisions and tough calls.

As a result of his consistently far-sighted policies and excellent crisis management, the Malaysia that was entrusted to me was a nation that was confident, resilient, dynamic and progressive.

In many ways, however, inheriting success is as difficult as taking over at a time of crisis. The latter requires the leader to extricate the nation from its turmoil.

While succeeding in such a situation is not easy, you begin at a lower base with a lot of upside. In my situation, the upside is not so obvious, but the downside is patently clear. I have therefore made it my priority to manage the success that Tun Dr Mahathir has bequeathed this nation.

Managing this success is not easy. In a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive world, Malaysia needs to work hard to survive and stay ahead. There are no free lunches for us.

The global mantra is compete or perish, and we must rise to this challenge. We can build on our achievements in order to survive and succeed. Or, we can be content with what we have, only to find that success that is not managed and built upon is success that is fleeting and momentary.

I have made a commitment to the people of Malaysia to bring our country closer to the realisation of Vision 2020. It is a pledge that I intend to keep by ensuring that this blessed nation that Tengku Abdul Rahman liberated, that Tun Razak nurtured, that Tun Hussein united and that Tun Dr Mahathir modernised remains peaceful, prosperous and competitive.

It is a promise that I make to the youth of this country who will cross the finish line in 2020 and who will take Malaysia far beyond to excellence, glory and distinction.

If a week is a long time in politics, what more four years. In fact, for the Opposition, four years must have seemed an eternity. In my estimation, they have seen their fortunes wane steadily since the last elections when they were able to notch a few surprise victories.

Tun Dr Mahathir's refusal to back down and his decision to dig his heels in and fight - and ultimately prove all critics wrong - dealt the

Opposition a crippling blow. A smooth transition which they cast aspersions upon has relegated their national impact to irrelevance. For them it has been a long, steep slide.

During the 1999 general elections, Malaysian voters faced a choice between the Barisan Nasional and the so-called Barisan Alternatif. Opposition parties had come together under an ad hoc arrangement - but interestingly not under one flag - in order to pursue two-pronged fights for Parliament and State seats.

Some people even ventured to say that the BA would emerge as a serious competitor to the BN in a two-party political system such as in the United States or Britain.

More than four years on, what has happened to the Barisan Alternatif? The hastily assembled pre-election coalition of Opposition parties disintegrated shortly after the polls with the DAP pulling out due to ideological disagreements with the BA's dominant partner, Pas.

There also now appears to be tension emerging between a struggling Keadilan and Pas, which recognises only itself as a serious competitor to the BN and treats its partners as marginal sidekicks.

Simply put, Barisan Alternatif has failed. It has failed in its objective of presenting the Malaysian voter with a credible alternative to the Barisan Nasional.

It has not been able to succeed because it overlooked the fundamental maxim that makes coalition politics work, which is power-sharing.

The BA came together because of a common enemy and not because of a common spirit and a shared destiny.

In the BN, we share a spirit of unity and we pursue a common destiny of peace and prosperity. We know what we want. The BA only knew what it did not want. That is not good enough for Malaysians.

Malaysians demand political representation that relies on more than just a protest vote. That is why the phenomenon that was Barisan Alternatif was fleeting. And that is why Barisan Nasional is here to stay.

Barisan Nasional represents a formula that has credibility and integrity. We are tried and tested. We are not fair-weather friends to each other nor to the rakyat. We share power, take collective responsibility and compromise with each other, all in the name of national unity.

We temper our respective ideologies so that we can expand the common ground between us. Our differences bring us closer together and does not drive us apart.

Power-sharing has enabled the initiation of policies that respond to the aspirations of all communities, whether in education, economic management or social development. Power-sharing has taught us to be sensitive and accommodating.

Sharing power also means sharing a future together. In the BN, we are clear that this future is for all Malaysians and that we have the experience and the plan to make it a reality.

The BN's credibility is further enhanced by the fact that, notwithstanding our unchanging commitment to our formula of power-sharing, we are constantly changing and reforming to meet the evolving aspirations of the people.

The rich experience that we have of providing successful government has taught us that the only constant is change and we need to stay ahead of the curve. The policies of the BN have constantly been reformist, bringing new ideas and policies with successive generations.

Growth with equity; rural development; poverty eradication; participatory democracy; capacity building; Malaysia Incorporated; leadership by example; industrialisation; the Multimedia Super Corridor

and Vision 2020 are but a few of the policy initiatives that have been launched in response to changing times.

The Barisan Nasional has never been satisfied with resting on its track record. We are constantly looking for ways to re-form and improve. For us, each political cycle represents an opportunity for renewal and change.

In recent years, we have moved towards strengthening the BN as a political entity. Mindful that without sustained effort, BN component parties would tend to do things on their own, we have enhanced the level of co-operation among our members.

We have strengthened the BN organisation so that more political programmes can be undertaken under the BN banner and not just under the banner of one component party. This has created a spirit of inclusiveness within the coalition.

Most recently, we have amended the BN constitution to formally establish Pemuda and Wanita as official wings of BN. This is another step towards making the BN a more cohesive and united political organisation.

The question that I am asked most frequently, especially in private, is when the elections will be. I will only tell you that it will be sometime this year, as required by the Constitution.

The second most frequent question I am asked is what I think the BN's chances are, especially in the north and north-eastern region. I have said before and will say again that I am encouraged by the level of support for the BN today.

During my visits to the States I have been able to gauge a mood of confidence on the ground towards the BN. In making my assessment, I am careful to not only listen to reports which are positive. I am happy to note that the Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers and other leaders have all taken heed of my call for people to speak truthfully. They tell me the good and the bad, which makes my prognosis of the situation on the ground more accurate.

I also believe that the BN, especially Umno, has worked hard to address our shortcomings that were evident in the last elections. We have brought members back together through more effective explanations of government policies and initiatives.

Our party activities, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, have continued to attract bigger crowds who crave for credible leadership. We have injected new blood in some States where it was needed to show that we are not afraid to change.

Pemuda and Puteri continue to attract new members into their rank and file, many of them educated professionals. Our party machinery has been refined many times over and the kinks ironed out.

We are more proactive in taking on Pas in the Malay heartland. If in the past we seemed hesitant to confront Pas, especially on the issue of Islam, today we are more confident in articulating our views.

There was a time when we were caught flat-footed. We struggled in our response. Some within our ranks even thought that the best way to handle Pas was to be more Pas than Pas.

We no longer abdicate religious discourse to Pas, because today we are able to project our understanding of Islam. Our vision of an ummah that is educated, progressive and prosperous is far more acceptable to the majority of Malaysians than Pas' dogma, which is rigid, divisive and obstructive of development.

I am also confident that we will be able to reverse the inroads that Pas made in the last elections because of the transient nature of their success. It is no secret that Pas rode on a topical issue in 1999 that had nothing to do with them.

They capitalised on the prevailing sentiment and were able to claim

seats in Kedah and capture Terengganu. But do not assume that their gains are impenetrable.

Two-thirds of the Pas seats in the Kedah State legislative assembly, which is controlled by the BN, are marginal. All of Pas' parliamentary seats in Kedah are marginal. By marginal I mean they won with a majority of less than 10 per cent. In Terengganu, 60 per cent of State seats held by Pas were won with a majority of less than 2,000.

All this does not mean that we can complacently walk into the elections and hope for a landslide victory. No, not by any means. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done to convince voters that the BN is the right choice. The feel-good factor that we enjoy today can easily be nullified by the wrong selection of candidates.

There used to be a saying that Umno could put a songkok to contest, and that songkok would be able to win. Voter choice today has changed markedly. There is less party affiliation among voters.

People are more concerned with issues and the credibility of individual candidates. Voters have become more discerning, and rightly so. They must make an informed decision on who their representative will be. This requires candidates whose appeal goes beyond party circles. The candidate must be a winner among the rakyat and not merely a party warlord.

It is for this reason that I would like to see a higher level of accountability among representatives of the people. As elected representatives, we hold our position and offices in trust for the people. If we violate this trust, the people have every right to revoke this trust and vote us out of office.

Political leaders must be measured against higher standards. In an age when the voter is much better informed, where policy issues are far more complex, and where constituents are far more mixed and diverse, those who seek public office must be benchmarked against a more stringent set of criteria.

As chairman of Barisan Nasional, I need to ensure that our candidates are credible and can withstand the detailed scrutiny of Malaysian voters. An observation I have often heard is that people have no problems with the BN and Umno - in fact they support the ideology and policies that we stand for - but they are driven away by the presence of personalities who are discredited.

It is for this reason that I have begun reviewing the performance of all BN elected representatives to see if they have lived up to the trust that has been given to them by the rakyat.

The seat in Parliament or the State Assemblies that they occupy is the seat of their constituents. If they have been derelict in representing the aspirations of the people, they have failed as leaders.

I have spent the first three months in office outlining the agenda for my Government. I am happy that, for the most part, this agenda has been accepted by those who have given their opinions and feedback.

People have responded well to some of my ideas and I will use their comments to refine my agenda further, especially in its implementation. That is always the challenge. I am under no illusions that victory can be declared just by saying the right things.

We must do what we say. This is the challenge because the devil is always in the details, and getting things moving is always a daunting task.

But I am firm in my conviction that my agenda is neither lip service nor electioneering. The Government that I lead and the party that I head have consistently shown that we work for the people and not for votes.

The agenda that I have set out is something that I want to see done and not just something that sounds nice in a speech made to elicit applause.

Whether it is in creating a more efficient public administration; eradicating corruption; cutting red tape; having better frontline services; strengthening institutions like the police; improving the education system; pursuing transparent and prudent economic management; or in creating new sources of income and growth for the rural areas, my commitment to see these objectives through is total and unwavering.

My first hundred days were my statement of intent. Now we get to work and walk the talk. I am aware that there are now high expectations of my administration. This is a far cry from the very low expectations that people had before I took office.

Realising these expectations will require everybody in my administration to pull their weight. My Cabinet colleagues, civil servants and other political leaders will have to make good their promise to work with me in pursuing the objectives that I have set.

I will hold them to their word because the agenda that has been set is considerable in scope. It requires collective wisdom and combined effort.

What I have set out to do is to bring government back to the people. Government serves the people and its policies must empower the people with opportunities, rights and responsibilities.

A Government that serves the rakyat better empowers people. A broader base for economic growth with renewal in the rural sector empowers people. Eliminating graft and ensuring that the public is not held ransom to discretionary delays empowers people.

My invitation for you to work with me empowers you. If opportunity and inclusion through empowerment is what you want, my message is simple: empower this Government to empower you. Believe in this leadership that believes in you. Work with me, to work for you.