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Abdullah open and very firm

Ahmad A. Talib; Manan Osman

PERAK Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali shared his experience in developing the Silver State in an interview with the New Straits Times and Berita Harian recently.

He spoke on a wide range of issues, from development to politics and his hopes and aspirations for the people and the State.

He also shared his experiences with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his opinion on their style of leadership. Tajol Rosli, the son of former Menteri Besar of Perak Tan Sri Ghazali Jawi, who served as the second MB after independence (1957-1960) and who was reappointed (1974-1977), took over the helm after the 1999 general election and will lead the State Umno and Barisan Nasional's challenge in the general election.

Here are excerpts of the interview with New Straits Times group editor AHMAD A. TALIB and NST Perak bureau chief MANAN OSMAN.

QUESTION: This is Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first State visit to Perak as Prime Minister. As Menteri Besar and Umno State liaison chairman, what is the significance of the visit?

ANSWER: Yes, this is Pak Lah's first State visit to Perak as Prime Minister, but he has visited us before as Deputy Prime Minister.

As this is his first State visit, we will welcome and congratulate him on his appointment.

During his visit we will bring him to Gugusan Manjoi, the biggest Malay settlement in the country, where he will officiate at the ground breaking of Manjoi's township project and in the afternoon, he will officiate at the new Perak Umno building. At night, he will have dinner with about 10,000 people at Dataran Ipoh.

Q: You have served under Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. From your observation, what is the difference between the two?

A: Datuk Seri Abdullah is more open, we can talk to him openly. Sometimes talking to him is like talking to a friend or brother. It's different with Dr Mahathir. Although he is quite open when we talk to him, we tend to respect him as a father.

Maybe this is because of the age difference between the two leaders. Datuk Seri Abdullah will just keep quiet and smile, but Tun Dr Mahathir will query if you make a mistake.

Some people say Pak Lah is very nice, but he can also lose his temper or raise his voice. However, I have never seen Dr Mahathir raise his voice.

Q: When did Datuk Seri Abdullah lose his temper?

A: It was in 1993 at the Umno general assembly. It happened during the nominations for the vice-president's post. The trend had been set for everybody to follow and the people could not help it at that time, so you have to follow the trend.

Pak Lah was standing for vice-president. When he saw the way the nomination was going, he raised his voice. He was very disappointed and said: "Surely Umno members are not cowards?," referring to all of us.

He secured only 20 nominations, the minimum required to enable him to contest for the post. But he lost, he and Tan Sri Sanusi (Junid).

Pak Lah is also very firm. He may take time to make a decision, but once a decision is made, he will stick to it. For example, the red building at Putrajaya where the Home Ministry is housed. Previously there was another ministry there, and the EPU (Economic Planning Unit) made a suggestion

that the Home Ministry move to another building because it would be cheaper.

But Pak Lah was adamant; he wanted the ministry to remain at the red building because he had made up his mind.

Q: How is his relationship with Umno Perak as President and as Deputy President?

A: It is too early to tell. As the Umno President he is still new, so I would not be able to answer that. We know his style as Deputy President; he supported the leadership.

But I think there will be a continuity in policies although there will be a difference in style. He wants us to be leaders of the people (and) for the people because we have been elected by the people. He wants Umno to not only to be clean, but must also be seen to be clean.

Q: What do you think of his policies on corruption and transparency?

A: He wants us to be efficient. We have set up two committees; one is aimed at improving efficiency and enhancing integrity and the other is on security.

Previously, the chairman of the State Security Council was the State secretary, but now it is the Menteri Besar. He wants it to be like it was before where the Menteri Besar was responsible for security.

On corruption, previously there was a committee responsible for this, but now we have one that aims to improve efficiency. For example, in the issuance of land titles, which is quite a problematic area.

We process the applications through the computer. So far, some 27,000 applications have been entered into the computer. Now we just have to monitor the applications. It is faster and more efficient.

We can immediately inform the person if his land application is approved and vice versa. Sometimes the land he is applying for belongs to someone else, or sometimes, the land does not exist.

Q: How different are the two leaders?

A: When they chaired the supreme council meeting, Dr Mahathir for instance, was a bit hesitant to interrupt when someone was long winded, but Pak Lah would not hesitate to do so.

If we make a mistake, Pak Lah will usually keep quiet, but Dr Mahathir will correct us there and then.

Q: How is the rapport between the two leaders and supreme council members?

A: Pak Lah is more friendly. Actually, Dr Mahathir is shy and that is why everywhere he goes, he brings along (Tun) Dr Siti Hasmah, the friendly Dr Siti Hasmah. With Dr Mahathir, if we don't say anything, he is silent too.

When we talk, he will listen. If it's inaccurate, he will correct it but he does not talk much. We are the ones who have to do the talking. With Pak Lah, if it's his favourite topic, he will be the one who will do most of the talking. Pak Lah is more talkative than Dr Mahathir.

Q: How are the preparations for Pak Lah's visit? Will the death of his mother be taken into consideration in the preparations?

A: We do not have any programmes which can offend Pak Lah during his time of mourning. For example, the launch of the Umno building will begin with a Quran recital to be followed by the nasyid.

Q: Is it true that development in Perak is slow?

A: For development to take place, we need economic activities. Perak used to depend on tin. Where there were mines, there would be development.

But in Sungai Manik and Parit Buntar, padi planting was the only activity, while Teluk Intan was developed because of oil palm. So when the tin mining industry collapsed, we were badly affected. The then Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib, later focused on industrialisation.

Fortunately, mining activities resulted in the State Government being in possession of a lot of land. Some of the exmining areas are suitable for other uses, such as agriculture.

We want foreign investors to come, but unfortunately we do not have ports or international airports. We are fortunate, however, in having a lot of land that is quite flat.

We gave land in Kampar to Utar (University Tunku Abdul Rahman) and gave KTM land in Batu Gajah for the train depot, which will be relocated from Sentul. We have also agreed to the construction of the new Batu Cantonment army camp in Sungkai. It covers 1,000 acres (400ha) and is cheap at RM1,000 per acre (per 0.4ha).

The relocation of 7,000 to 8,000 soldiers will also help Sungkai flourish. Sungkai is located along the double-tracking railway project, which means that those working in Kuala Lumpur can stay in Sungkai, Tanjung Malim and Gunung Besout.

Felda is planning to develop about 100 acres (40ha) near Trolak and Gunung Besout. It will cost only RM10 to convert the land status, because we believe Felda will convert more land and introduce more industries.

When the tin mining industry collapsed, there were many empty houses in Ipoh and rental rates were low.

Q: Are you satisfied with the pace of development in Perak?

A: No. I'm not happy. Actually, we want to accelerate growth in Lumut and Pangkor. But before that can happen the Ipoh-Lumut highway must be in place. The highway can shorten the journey to Lumut to 35 minutes compared with the 1 hour 45 minutes on the present road.

With the highway, those who stay in Lumut can commute to Ipoh and the RMN (Royal Malaysian Navy) staff can also stay in Ipoh. Furthermore, Lumut will also prosper and people will also be attracted to buy property in Lumut.

But construction of highway has been deferred because there are claims it is not viable. That is why we have requested the Federal Government to help us and provide an allocation for the project.

Q: Can the Ipoh-Lumut highway project be revived?

A: It can still be implemented but no one is willing to do it. We also have a problem with flight services as there is only one flight from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh daily and vice versa. We have invited AirAsia but have yet to get a response.

Q: What is Perak's development strategy?

A: We want to develop the tourism sector but we have to ensure that it is a balanced development. For example, if we want to give an island to a developer, we must also think of the consequences and what will happen to the villagers, especially Malays.

Q: What is the State Government' priority in terms of investment?

A: Cement factories have invested a lot here, specifically in Tasek, Chemor and Padang Rengas, and each investment is worth RM1 billion.

Furthermore, the Perak Hanjoong cement factory in Padang Rengas recently invested another RM900 million, so it's easily worth RM2 billion. There is also the RM4 billion Proton City project in Tanjung Malim.

Besides this, we are also interested in developing the defence industry. We have a ship-building factory for offshore patrol vessels (OPV) in Lumut. We also want to refurbish submarines in Lumut.

We have allocated 300 acres (120ha) of land to Tan Sri Amin Shah Omar Shah (of PSC-Naval Dockyard) in Tanjung Tualang to establish underground testing facilities for weapons, such as for rifles and cannons.

We are aware that we are not attractive to electronic companies, but if they are interested in coming here, we are ready to sell land cheaply to them to build factories and hostels for their employees.

We use land as an incentive.

Q: Where does agriculture fit in the State development plan?

A: We have been planting padi in Sungai Manik and Krian. The only padi estate in Malaysia, about 12,000 acres (4,800ha), is in Felcra Changkat Lada.

They opened up the plantation area and sell them for RM12,500 per hectare. The people pay only 10 per cent or RM1,250 and the rest will be financed by Bank Pertanian. We will give them the land title.

We have "Ladang Untuk Rakyat" and "Ladang Untuk Peladang". "Ladang Untuk Rakyat" is managed by the State Agriculture Development Corporation (SADC) while farmer associations in the State manage "Ladang Untuk Peladang".

We also have "Ladang Usahawan Tani". We are fortunate because SADC is very liquid.

Q: Can you elaborate on the Ladang Pahlawan concept?

A: For "Ladang Pahlawan", we sell the lots to ex-servicemen who are also Perakians.

We allocate 70 per cent to former military personnel and 30 per cent to ex-policemen. This will be for life. More than 1,000 people have benefitted from the project.

SADC also keeps part of the plantation as a buffer and has its own mills to process palm oil. "Ladang Rakyat" belongs to the State Development Corporation and the profits are given to the hard-core poor who will receive RM250 per month.

For "Ladang Untuk Rakyat", we sell the lots to the public who will earn RM100 for each acre.

Q: Is it correct to say that Perak wants the defence industry to be located in the State?

A: We have given 1,000 acres (400ha) of land each in Batu Gajah and Sungkai for the development of army camps. In Lumut, there are 14,000 staff at the Royal Malaysian Navy base.

Eventually, we may have 25,000 military personnel in Perak. The number does not include those in other camps in Taiping and Pengkalan Hulu. If we put them together, there would be between 25 and 30 per cent of about 100,000 military personnel in Perak.

The armed forces also use the Lumut Port to bring in imported items. We have thousands of acres of land which can be developed and act as a catalyst for future development.

Q: What are the major challenges in developing Perak?

A: The main problem is attracting investors. If they want to set up an electronic industry, the area must be close to the airport. If it involves the shipment of cargoes by ships, they will set up operations in Penang or Port Klang.

But, if they need an area or land to rear chickens, for instance, they can come to Perak because they would need something like 1,000 acres (400ha) including a buffer zone of 500 acres (200ha).

We also offer a lease period of between 20 and 30 years, so we receive investments in prawn and chicken breeding.

Q: Did Perak go on trade and investment missions overseas?

A: When I became Menteri Besar, we were recovering from the economic downturn. I did go to India in 2001 with the hope of attracting investments to the IT industry, but so far we have not seen anything yet.

However, in the case of Selangor, they do not even have to go but people will still come.

Q: There are certain people who feel that Perak does not have strong attractions as a tourist destination. What are the interesting tourism products in the State?

A: Unlike in other states, we do not have organised tour packages. How

can we reach interesting places like Gua Tempurung? The State Development Corporation (SDC) bought two coasters to be managed by a private company to transport tourists to the place but this is not successful. The private sector including hotels lack the initiative to organise such packages. Certainly people do not come here just to sleep.

Q: What is Perak's tourism budget?

A: We used to allocate about RM6 million (a year) with emphasis on advertising. But now the emphasis is on tourism-related programmes such as TV3's "sure heboh" carnival and the Joran angling competition.

Such things attract people and are an effective form of (tourism) promotion. The State Government does not derive direct income from the tourism industry but we have to remember that the city makes money from taxes and the people can get employment. The Federal Government too is supportive.

We have identified 10 tourist spots in Perak but not one has achieved international standard. We have to get the support of the private sector to develop the tourism products.

For example, if there is anybody who wishes to embark on tulip cultivation in Bukit Larut (Maxwell Hill), the State Government is willing to provide a launching grant of RM100,000.

With an efficient network of roads between Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, more people will stop by in Ipoh. Children will return to visit their parents more regularly. Food is also cheap.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about Royal Belum and what measures are being taken to protect the forest?

A: Royal Belum, which covers 117,500ha, was a security area during the Emergency. The tropical rainforest has been gazetted into a State Park and as a permanent forest reserve, which means logging is strictly prohibited.

Recently, the Sultan of Perak declared it as Royal Belum. The State Government has embarked on a low-impact development plan to preserve and protect the forest. It will be managed by the Perak State Park Corporation.

Q: Perak has a target to have zero squatters by the end of 2005. Can this be achieved?

A: At one time I thought the people of Perak were like their counterparts in Selangor. If they are, the target can be achieved. But the people in Perak do not want to live in flats; they want housing lots.

It is possible, but it will take time. If they can afford to buy housing lots it would not be a problem, but they want it cheap at RM400 and then expect the Government to put up the infrastructure, water supply, electricity and other facilities. I don't think the Government can afford that.

Q: What about sports? In what area does Perak have potential?

A: Archery is one of the most promising. We have a teacher in Pengkalan Hulu who coaches students in archery at three schools. For example, Mohd Marbawi Sulaiman from Pengkalan Hulu who won Malaysia's first gold medal at the 22nd Vietnam Sea Games in archery last December.

Q: How are preparations for the general election coming along?

A: We are confident Umno will be able to recapture all the seats it lost in the last general election, especially if we can field the right candidates in Parit Buntar and Parit.

Q: How many new faces will be featured in the Perak line-up?

A: We now have seven new State seats and another eight were vacant following the defeat of our candidates in the last election. Two of the eight are division chiefs. If we allow them to stand as candidates again, we will have 13 new faces.

There will also be some who will be dropped by MCA and Gerakan and in

Umno there may be another one or two more.

Q: Do you have enough second-echelon leaders in Umno and BN?

A: We are quite lucky that we have leaders such as Datuk Zahid Hamidi (MP for Bagan Datoh), Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah (MP for Tambun), Datuk Hamzah Zainuddin and Datuk Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir (Perak Youth chief).

They all hold important posts. For example, Datuk Zahid is also chairman of the National Housing Corporation, Datuk Hamzah is Felcra chairman and Datuk Husni is chairman of Yayasan Perak, Matrade (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation) and the National Higher Education Fund Corporation.

In the women's wing, we have Datuk Kamilia Ibrahim, who is a Wanita exco member and Perak Puteri chief Noor Asmah Nawawi.