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Najib: Some hiccups but let's make NS work

By Rose Ismail; Anita Anandarajah

HE joked about feeling "overwhelmed" by the all-female team from the New Straits Times but Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was clearly prepared for the interview. Over tea at his Putrajaya office, while a thunderstorm raged outside, he spoke affably, candidly and calmly about the rationale for the National Service programme, its problems and its future.

With this, ROSE ISMAIL and ANITA ANANDARAJAH begin The Sunday Interview, an occasional series.

NST: Where is National Service taking us?

Najib: National Service is an important programme. It is the first time we are attempting something like this at the national level which covers significant numbers (of people).

We are trying to mould people; to get those from different races to be comfortable doing things with one another.

This is the only way they will appreciate each other's aspirations and sensitivities.

The school system is a product of political compromise and does not allow for such interaction. Ninety per cent of Chinese are in Chinese schools and 70 per cent of Indians are in Tamil schools.

Secondly, there is the feeling that a national programme will help build the character of younger generations, making them more disciplined and resilient.

So, we implemented the programme on a scale that would make a difference.

The trainees come from all backgrounds - some of them are role models in schools, prefects, some come from middle class and well-to-do families.

You also have those who are poorer, some even from difficult socio-economic backgrounds - broken homes and neighbourhoods with social problems. Some may be juvenile delinquents involved in unhealthy activities. It is a mixed bag.

It did occur to us to pick those from the school system which would mean fewer problems for us. But this was an opportunity to try and make better people of those from difficult or problematic backgrounds.

We did anticipate problems - I'm not saying it's an excuse for us not to do anything. We just have to manage and cope.

Many of the problems originated from innocent pranks. We were 18 once. Obviously, quite often they tease one another. Sometimes it becomes excessive and it leads to fights. We have to take this seriously.

We have decided to take the real problem ones out of the camps and put them into two special camps so they will not affect others.

NST: When do you start doing this?

Najib: It is already in place. Between 70 and 80 of the trainees are already there and this has eased the problem somewhat in the various camps.

NST: But there is only a week or so before the first batch finish their three-month training.

Najib: We're not touching the first batch. This is for the second and third batches.

NST: Did you anticipate such problems?

Najib: There was always the fear. There are 85,000 participants in 41 camps, so even if you take a small percentage, the numbers could be big.

Or those who cause problems may be few, but enough for the Press to report on a daily basis.

I'm still optimistic about this programme. Assessment will be done through questionnaires that will be sent out to all the participants. The ones I have met seem enthusiastic about the programme. Some have even said they want to spend a longer time at NS. So the general reaction has been positive.

NST: You mentioned that 70 to 80 problem trainees have been sent to separate camps. Where are these camps located?

Najib: There's one in Klang and one in Morib.

NST: Is there more military-style training in these camps? And what is the ratio of trainer to trainee?

Najib: Discipline is tighter, more focused. There is also counselling. The ratio of trainer and trainee is 1 to 2. This means more attention is given to them.

NST: There are about 6,000 trainees in institutes of higher learning and a limited number of trainers. Are there plans to hire more trainers with military backgrounds?

Najib: We are looking at increasing or improving the quality of the trainers for future programmes. I think we have to keep the people in universities busy.

There are two schools of thought: the first says that after one month of regimented training, we should not place them in a pressure cooker when they go to the universities. We can make it tougher for them, but is this desirable?

At the same time, if they are idle, they end up doing all kinds of things.

The numbers in universities are large because we have to keep costs down. We are undertaking a national programme but the Government doesn't want to spend too much money on it.

NST: With some of the problems that have cropped up, do you think there should have been more military training and personnel involved?

Najib: Not necessarily. In the first phase of the programme, the trainers are not military people but there are quite a number of former military and police people involved.

The first batch has been relatively free of trouble because they come mainly from the school system. The second and third batches involve a number who left the school system some time ago. There are mechanics and welders. They are more independent, so to speak. The problems are mostly coming from the second or third batch.

NST: When will trainees be asked to make an assessment of the programme?

Najib: This will take place before they leave. We hope we will get an objective assessment. After that we will consult different groups before we make a decision on the future of this programme.

NST: Will the questionnaire only be given to the young people? What if trainees are keen to go on but other groups - parents, NGOs, politicians - say no. How will you decide?

Najib: I don't think the parents will object. We've had surveys and consultations before. And they were supportive of the programme. There are members of the Opposition party who are trying to exploit this, trying to make political capital out of it.

That has tended to accentuate some of the problems and issues related to the NS programme.

NST: Would you send your daughter to NS after reading all the news highlighted daily?

Najib: Yes, I would. I think I would still be confident about sending her. I think it will be useful for a youngster to be exposed to a training

programme like this because they are dealing with new challenges.

NST: Does it give you sleepless nights?

Najib: I'm concerned, obviously. Once parents release their children to such a programme, they are under the care of the Government. There is a moral obligation to take care of them. That's why when there was the report of the alleged rape, I was very, very disturbed.

On the other hand, there are other countries like Singapore where NS is carried out over a two-year period. The early phase was difficult. It wasn't a walk in the park for them but they persevered.

They discovered that their National Service is a significant factor in moulding the future generation of Singaporeans. They think their strength - discipline and competitiveness - would not have been achieved without it.

I wonder if we are pampering Malaysians too much? The Singaporeans have to stomach being in uniform and living in barracks under more arduous and risky training. They've lost people, accidents have happened, people have died and so forth. But they never gave up.

NST: Does this mean that you are going to push for this because you don't want Malaysians to be pampered?

Najib: I'm just posing the question: Are Malaysians softies? Can they not cope with a three-month training programme?

NST: What do you think?

Najib: I just posed the question (laughs). It does not matter what I think. I'm just giving an example that in Singapore the society eventually accepted it. Now why are we screaming and yelling when this is just a three-month programme?

There are shortcomings, but let's take a look how we can improve. Why shouldn't we be prepared to go through something like this? Why can't we think that we'll come out better people?

NST: In light of the disciplinary problems faced, are there plans to make NS compulsory only for males?

Najib: I don't want to be the person to make the decision. It must be a collective decision that goes through the process. In other words, there will be the questionnaire, consultation with various groups, and then the majlis will make its recommendations. The Cabinet committee will convene, and eventually the Cabinet will decide.

There are suggestions to not take women on board until we have fully stabilised this programme, separate the women in a different camp, increase the number of women trainers.

All these ideas have been bandied about and I think we should look at them.

NST: It seems that you have been left to carry this baby that was born prematurely. Do you think the gestation period should have been longer?

Najib: We had over a year to prepare this but until you implement something like this, you really wouldn't know how it is going to turn out. Even if you were to delay for another year, would you have anticipated these things?

Take everything - the good and the bad - and try to improve on them as we go along. I don't think I should be the person to be burdened with this.

NST: But you are.

Najib: Certainly. That's because every time there is a Press conference, the Press will ask me. After a while, it forms in people's minds that 'oh, he's the man who's responsible'. I accept the fact that it is a challenge for all of us. I didn't make this decision by myself. It is the entire Government, especially the Cabinet committee that decided on this format. Let's do it together. This is a National Service programme; it is not

Najib's programme.

I think the Press should help me in this regard. Don't personalise the whole issue. In any case, I wasn't the one to suggest the NS programme to begin with. It came out of a seminar, and it was committed by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was the Prime Minister at that time. I was chosen to lead the programme.

NST: If, after all this effort, we do not find ourselves closer to national integration, is this a sign that people are not ready to be shaken out of their boxes?

Najib: It could be seen that way. There cannot be any national integration through schools. And there is no way to change that because it is a part of our social contract. We cannot and we don't have any intention to change that given our solemn commitment. Even if we try, as we have with the Sekolah Wawasan, it was severely criticised by some as a political issue.

At the end of the day, if you give up in frustration and say 'to hell with it', you are just saying to the society 'I don't care what happens, let it be. We'll all go our separate ways. Who cares what happens in the future'.

But surely as a responsible Government, we cannot take that attitude. We have to get everybody together as a united, cohesive society. Human assets are the biggest thing we have for the future of Malaysia.

NST: Are there plans to revamp the NS syllabus?

Najib: After we complete the first year, the entire programme will be reevaluated. I don't want to do anything in a hurry. And I don't want any piecemeal tinkering.

NST: There have been complaints from the trainees themselves that security at IPTAs is lax. Some come and go as they please without filling up the necessary forms.

Najib: One thing we discovered is that university students are allowed greater freedom by university authorities.

The latter tend to take the same attitude now but they fail to realise that this is a different programme.

NST: If we had a referendum tomorrow on whether NS should go on, where do you think the vote should be?

Najib: I think majority of the people would support the NS.

NST: On occasion it seems that NS Training Council chairman Professor Datuk Ahmad Fawzi Mohd Basri is saying one thing on one level while you say another.

Najib: I've informed Fawzi that the council was created as an advisory body, and it has no authority to make decisions; it can only make recommendations. The recommendation is made to the minister in charge under the law, and it is up to the minister to decide. In that sense, whatever Fawzi says cannot be a policy. But sometimes when the Press cannot get me, they go to him. I think that adds to the confusion more than anything else.

NST: What has been the most frustrating thing about the NS programme so far?

Najib: I think it's the reports that focus too much on the incidents of fights as opposed to the positive things: there are people who are enthusiastic about it, having fun, making new friends, new experiences.

But these viewpoints are not reported. What is reported are stolen cellphones, brawls, accusations. Do we really know the facts? If you do much of such reporting, people will get the impression that NS has gone out of control.

NST: Have you received feedback from your friends whose children are attending NS?

Najib: I don't know. I don't have that many friends (laughs). I have

come across many people who say their children are enjoying themselves.

Understanding and appreciation of the whole programme is necessary. We have to educate our public as well. It is our duty to tell them that this is an important programme for nation-building.

If we want to achieve Bangsa Malaysia, this is one of the ways. Otherwise it would be an elusive dream.

We tried through the school system, but we couldn't do it. We tried Sekolah Wawasan, but it felt like a difficult road to take. The NS, for once, has got the broad base support; that's why we launched it.

So let's really make it work, because the future of Malaysia could depend on the success of the NS programme - the future not in terms of existing as a nation, but of climbing to greater heights especially with Pak Lah's vision of Cemerlang, Gemilang and Terbilang.

It's easy to be a populist leader. But to try and convince people that something is good for them is a bigger challenge. Initially, it is difficult but in due course people will appreciate something that is done for their benefit.

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