

20/04/2003

Hadi: Malays still the core of politics

THIS is a translated excerpt of our interview with Terengganu Menteri Besar and Pas acting president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, which was conducted in Bahasa Malaysia.

NST: On behalf of the New Sunday Times and Berita Minggu, let me begin by extending my gratitude to you for agreeing to this meeting. What lessons should Muslims and Malays learn from Iraq?

Hadi: An important lesson is that the true saviour of the ummah is Islam and not any foreign ideology. We see that the Arabs were saved by Islam, not Arab nationalism. Islam successfully shaped Arab society, which was known for its ignorance, disunity and myriad weaknesses, transforming it into a major world power, including Baghdad, which was the centre of a supreme and dominant civilisation in the history of mankind.

The fall of the Abassiyah Government in Baghdad was caused by them abandoning Islam. Today, we see how disunited they are, even when they are in a desperate state, threatened by their enemies. This shows that only Islam can unite the Arabs.

NST: In Islam, there is no government of rulers but a caliphate. Why do the Muslim Arabs have rulers?

Hadi: Islam recognises governments irrespective of whether by ruler, caliph or president. What is important is that a government is fair and holds Allah's government supreme.

NST: What has hit Iraq shows how weak the Muslims are today. The Muslim world is not united. The Arabs themselves are not united. Is it proper, then, for Saudi Arabia to continue being the protector of the holy places of Mecca and Medina?

Hadi: In my view, we cannot point to any country in the Muslim world. It is the collective responsibility of the entire Muslim nation to assess itself and evaluate past mistakes, so that we are no longer used by others.

We are a people to whom Allah has given the most glorious faith. We have vast manpower, with more than a billion Muslims worldwide. We are given the richest places on earth.

We have experts among us, some of whom are working in the United States and Europe. Unfortunately, they do not want to return to their homeland.

NST: This is a brain drain.

Hadi: This is happening. Why? We are not benefiting. Look at our own country. An expert who does not agree with the Government is sidelined, pressured....

We cannot have differences of opinion in some areas, but we can in others. In some things, we must be united, and in some, we can argue. The problem is that we can't tell the wood from the trees. This is the problem not only among Muslims but also the Arab countries themselves.

NST: Is Pas still firmly for the concept of an Islamic theocracy, with no compromise for Malaysia's plural society?

Hadi: Yes, that has been the foundation of our struggle since Pas was formed. A plural society is an objective derived from an Islamic nation, which is the message of Islam for the whole of mankind.

NST: Some feel that Muslims are weak in knowledge and technology, because Islam emphasises duties and obligations (fardhu ain). We place too much importance on "twigs over trees", form over substance, and not on knowledge.

Hadi: I disagree, because leaves cannot be separated from twigs, twigs cannot be separated from branches, branches cannot be separated from stems and stems cannot be separated from roots.

We see how Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) started the development of Muslims through the development of humanity. Human beings themselves can be developed, given knowledge and virtuous behaviour.

We see how the Quran was revealed, beginning with the Iqra', "read in the name of God". This is not just a part of the doctrine, a part of the religion, of this world of drinking and eating, of science and technology.

What is happening today is that the West has overwhelmed Islamic civilisation.

NST: Pas was with Barisan Nasional on Malaysia's stand on the Iraq war. Wouldn't it be nice if both sides took a common stand on other issues, especially those concerning Malays and Islam?

Hadi: I said at a meeting with the Press Club that if the US wants to interfere in Malaysian affairs such as asking that Dr Mahathir steps down, Pas and I will defend him.

Dr Mahathir may step down if he wishes. It's up to him. We do not want the US telling him to. This is clear. We do not want outside interference.

But in our domestic affairs, we would, of course, want to give our views for the good of the country. In our internal affairs, we need diverse principled views to make proper assessments.

This is democracy. We have to respect democracy. There is nothing wrong with this openness.

NST: On the issue of Sekolah Agama Rakyat: Pas is reacting as though all religious schools have been affected by the decision to stop funding these schools. The truth is that many SAR are still receiving aid. Religious schools run by Umno are also affected. Why did Pas politicise the issue?

Hadi: This is bigger than politics because it is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman to learn the religion (fardu ain). Studying other fields of knowledge is also obligatory (fardu kifayah). It is not compulsory (wajib) for every person to be a doctor or an engineer. But it is compulsory for everyone to learn the religion.

Religious education is continuous. The learning of fardu kifayah is not disrupted. This is why we are defending SAR.

The Government should help these schools and not stop funding them. Although the Government said that it would not close them, as the Prime Minister has stated, stopping the funds leads in that direction.

Also, I read in the media that the US has been interfering in the world's centres of Islamic learning. I am worried that there is a Western-sponsored agenda to erode the credibility and dignity of Muslims and Islam.

NST: But Dr Mahathir is well known to have opposed the US. How can it be said that it is as though he has given his blessings to the US action?

Hadi: Not everything Dr Mahathir does is right. He makes mistakes too. I support him in his opposition to the US and in his foreign policies.

I laud the Prime Minister for his anti-US policies, in his rejection of IMF aid. I admired his action in rejecting that. We did not need the IMF for our economic recovery. That was one action that I agreed with.

But I find his action undemocratic in the SAR issue and in the withdrawal of scholarships for students who support Pas, or of assistance from anyone simply because he supports an opposition party.

NST: After a year as Pas acting president, there is concern that the moderate image of Pas under the late Datuk Fadzil Noor will become radical. Your reluctance to withdraw the Amanat Haji Hadi (Hadi's decree) has raised scepticism.

Hadi: I feel that this is a typical political gimmick. The opposition

(to Pas) will always play on an issue to erode the people's support. But the people around us know and understand better. That is why from 1978 to 1982, the majority vote for me has been increasing, not reducing as votes elsewhere.

NST: Is it true that, since the last general election, a new group of younger Pas members has been attempting to sideline the ulama who had been the core of the party struggle?

Hadi: It is not true that the younger professionals who join Pas are trying to remove the ulama. They are preserving the foundation of Islamic struggle. Trying to remove the ulama would not be consistent with their true struggle and participation in Pas.

NST: Compared with the first two years of Pas rule in Terengganu, the people seem to have changed. We hear of alleged weaknesses in the State's administration.

Hadi: If we are accused of having weaknesses, these are inherited from the previous Government. We cannot overcome them in two or three years.

However, we have been successful in other areas. We have overcome the problem of poverty through land. We have been able to settle 50,000 new land applications.

We have also resolved the problem of illegal settlers. Our programme for the poor must have an objective. It must not be undertaken just because of an election.

During the early stages of our planning, when we received RM430 million in royalty, we increased the allocation for the poor by 100 per cent. Those who received RM100 got RM200, those who received RM150, then got RM300. This was shortterm.

Our long-term plan is based on agriculture. Although we don't have the resources, we are getting them from zakat (tithe) contributors.

Zakat collections increased from RM11 million in 1999, RM21 million in 2000, RM27 million in 2001, to RM34 million last year.

We also get revenue from land premiums. The people, therefore, work hard on their land because they know the Government needs the money.

Also 15 government departments have been awarded ISO 9000. Among them is the Forestry Department, a very critical department, which received it about two weeks ago from the Primary Industries Minister. Our land office is the best in Malaysia.

Terengganu has the lowest incidence of dengue in the country. This proves that our health level has increased and this is a success.

Nevertheless, we realise that we still have weaknesses that need to be overcome. This cannot be denied.

NST: What more needs to be done?

Hadi: Among them is that we want unity in society. For example, when we took over the State Government, we did not immediately sack the JKKK (village development and security committee) members appointed by the previous Government. We waited until their terms expired.

Then we set up JSR (People's Syura Committee) in which we included Umno members.

It was the same when we realised that 80 per cent of mosque imams in Terengganu were from Umno. We did not sack a single one of them, not like when our people were sacked during Umno's time. We have recalled them and made them new imams. This is one way of establishing harmony in society.

NST: People say that Pas' victories in the last general election were because Umno supporters voted for Pas due to several factors then. They say today Terengganu Umno seems to be rejuvenated. What are the chances for Pas in the next general election?

Hadi: Pas' strength is the party's strength. Umno's strength is aided by the government machinery, without which Umno is weak. If we look at any

one election seat since 1959 until 1995, we see the BN or Alliance in Terengganu winning with a small majority.

The votes given to Pas were votes from members or supporters. In 1995, we won seven of 32 seats. BN won with majorities of less than 1,000. The fence-sitters were the determining voters.

We all know Umno controls the media.

NST: Some media only.

Hadi: (laughs) They control the government machinery, the media, especially the electronic media. Television goes into every home. Programmes such as Kelantan Dalam Gerhana in Kelantan, Terengganu Kita, go into every home.

We depend on ceramahs and ceramahs depend on police permits. Despite this, we can still move. So, we depend on the true strength of our party.

Umno is dependent on Government help. That is why I am confident. When we were not the Government, we could still move ahead. So when we are the Government, we are in a more comfortable position. What more now that our successes are known to the people?

NST: What about from the national perspective? Can Pas increase its support in other districts?

Hadi: Based on the 1999 general election, according to our follow-up survey, about 60 per cent of Malay voters support us.

BN depends on votes from non-Muslims and non-Malays. What is important is for us to defend these votes.

From the response we get outside Terengganu, we see our support rising, especially among new voters - those who are educated, who can think for themselves.

NST: What about support from the non-Malays, the 40 per cent of the population who are not Muslims?

Hadi: We realise that there is a need for unity in a plural society, and for the Government to have majority support because total support is not possible.

We have to show the successes of Kelantan and Terengganu, especially in being fair to non-Muslims. These have been shown.

But we see changes in the non-Muslim votes and in the Government's panicky state, so much so the BN forced the MCA to take over Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press so that these newspapers can be controlled.

This was because these papers had been so open. In fact, they interviewed me much earlier on. Berita Minggu and New Sunday Times are only doing it now.

NST: What type of Islamic state does Pas wish to set up in Malaysia?

Hadi: An Islamic state that displays justice in a plural society. And we hope that our society's non-Muslims give us a chance to show Islam without us forcing them to.

If non-Muslims can see that Islam is not just about hudud but about the economy, about land and other laws, I believe that they will accept Islam as a national policy while they remain believers of other faiths. They are not forced to embrace Islam.

NST: Pas is opposed by the DAP over an Islamic state. How can Pas co-operate with a party that is against its struggle?

Hadi: That is DAP's right. Our co-operation is in the elections to defeat the BN. We realise that the Malays continue to be at the core of national politics. This cannot be denied. If Umno loses, then Pas wins. If Umno wins, Pas loses.

In an environment where Pas has more seats than Umno, it is not impossible that other parties can form the Government with Pas. What is important is to focus on strategically controlling Muslim seats. This is an open strategy. Actually, this cannot be told to people (laughs).

NST: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will take over the leadership of the country in November. What are your hopes for Abdullah?

Hadi: I hope that Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi will continue with some of the things that Dr Mahathir has done - a foreign policy that does not bow to the US, on the IMF and other important policies.

I hope for some changes in the country, for a more democratic environment that allows the Opposition to move without any obstacles to holding ceramahs, without any administrative restrictions that cause problems to States run by the Opposition.

NST: What about your views of Dr Mahathir? Any message to the PM who is stepping down after 23 years?

Hadi: It is up to him to step down. As I have said, if he is stepping down because of outside pressure, I don't agree. But if he is doing so to find peace of mind, it is up to him.

NST: Might Pas and Umno ever work together again, as they did after May 13, 1969?

Hadi: That was a temporary liaison, when we were together in overcoming issues. But on the principle of upholding the glory of Islam, I feel it is too difficult to be united.

This needs a muzakarah, which Pas once proposed, involving party leaders with expertise in all fields. Then we can discuss. We need to realise that the existence of diverse parties is something positive, so that we have checks and balances.

NST: Does this mean that Pas will not close the door to co-operation?

Hadi: That is our responsibility in facing threats, wars or common problems. Where we agree, we are not closing our doors.