

Mahathir on why Umno is worth saving

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"When sometimes, behind his back, they called him a tyrant, he merely smiled and uttered this profound observation: 'If someday I turn liberal, they will say I have let them down.'"

- Émile Zola, 'His Excellency'

In a two-part interview, the former prime minister who for many, is the de facto opposition leader of this country, talks candidly about Umno and his new nemesis, Prime Minister Najib Razak.

My opinion of the former prime minister is a matter of public record. In person, Dr Mahathir Mohamad is soft spoken and has the remarkable ability to convey populist appeal without abandoning his hardline long-held beliefs that a paternalistic form of government is the only type of government suitable for Malaysians. Anyone speaking to the former prime minister realises that here is a man who finds currency in realpolitik and seeks consensus merely as a means to an end.

One gets the impression that he paints in broad strokes not because he doesn't get the details but rather because the former allows him more control of the narrative and he understands that people more often agree on the bigger picture but get bogged down in the details. It is a useful political and rhetorical tactic that appeals to the pragmatic nature of the polity that has sustained him all through his political career.

Mahathir is also the polar opposite of our current scandal-plagued prime minister. He genuinely believes that the apparatus of the state should be used to sustain a political ideology, an ideology of his creation, which over the years he has articulated as some sort of pragmatic conservatism.

Corruption, racial and religious sensitivities and all those issues that comes with a multi-cultural polity, should be controlled as a means to maintain political hegemony and not eradicated to achieve some sort of utopic ideal.

This of course has led to numerous problems, political and social, that Mahathir and indeed many politicians - establishment and opposition - fail to see as something fundamentally wrong with our system and not merely partisan power plays.

Najib, on the other hand, believes that the apparatus of the state is there to serve his interests. It is no point detailing how I arrive at this conclusion because every day presents new opportunities for the minions of Putrajaya to remind the average Malaysian that he or she is at the mercy of the Najib state.

However, as activist cum lawyer Haris Ibrahim reminds us, we need not be afraid.

The Saudi foreign minister (Adel Al-Jubeir) has said that the donations came from Saudi Arabia - that he is satisfied with the AG (attorney-general) investigations and as far as the Saudis were concerned, the matter has been settled. What is Tun's response to this?

Mahathir: That's what he says. Investigations, you need documentary proof. If money is transferred, there must be something written down - the cheques, the records in the bank, the bank that is used.

A statement alone is not enough. So until I can view the documents, until they are publicised, any statement alone is not going to be believed.

Why is Umno worth saving?

Umno is as good as the people in Umno. It is not the organisation that is bad, it is the people who run the organisation. You can run it well and it will deliver, or you can abuse it and it will become very bad.

So the thing to do really is to change the people, not change the organisation. You can change the organisation slightly in order to avoid abuses, but no matter how well you word the constitution, the laws, the rules, there will be people who will abuse, interpret it in a different way and abuse the provisions. So we are seeing people who want to change the organisation structure, but the fault is the people who run it.

Tun, you say you have made bad choices when it comes to your successors. Could this be that Umno breeds candidates that are lacking?

I would agree. When people lead Umno, their tendency is not to be challenged. Therefore, they do not allow people with calibre, with charisma to join. So in the end, you have very few choices. The choice that you have will not be as good as you would like them to be. The best people are not allowed to join because when they join, they undermine the chances of the incumbents.

Isn't it true that the only reason why there is a need for a Citizen's Declaration is because Tun has not been able to dislodge Najib despite Tun's influence in Umno?

Well, all the avenues for redress has been abused and shut down by Najib. Normally you can take legal action or political action. Political actions would be votes of non-confidence. But Najib has somehow or rather managed to influence the majority to keep on supporting him despite everything that was said against him.

On the other hand, if you go to the police to report, the police will not act. Instead the police may question you with sedition or terrorism or undermining the country and charge you in

the court. So the means of redress has been shut down. What is there left? Nothing actually.

But when the whole of the population wants change, they can voice it either through street demonstrations or going outside. The least we can do is have a citizens' declaration which disrupts as little as possible.

You see in some countries they go on streets demonstrations throughout the country or they go on general strike to bring down the government. This is not quite right but this is all they can do.

If Najib allows for free expression of members of parliament and not try to do anything to threaten them, people can use the Parliament. In Parliament, you have a vote of no confidence, then people can decide but that has been shut down.

Why does Tun think that all your political allies have been taken into custody or impeded but why is Tun being left alone?

They have already sent the police to question me but their questioning I suppose did not give them the substance to charge me in court, so they have not taken that, and maybe they feel that it will not be a popular move.

If they catch somebody, they think people won't care so they will arrest those people but the fact is that I have supporters also - I have a lot of supporters - so they think twice before charging me or taking me to court or jailing me or detaining me, but I think they would like to do that.

Surely, Tun was aware of the corruption of Najib when Tun was campaigning for Umno in the last general election?

No, I wasn't. I get reports about corruption all the time. When I ask them, please give me some evidence, nobody can give me any evidence. All they can say is well "we heard", "these are rumours" and all that.

Rumours cannot be sustained in court. I hear there is, was, corruption but not to the extent that what we want to do is blocked because of corruption. We want to build anything we can build before - we build roads, we build highways, we build airports. These things can be done. So when you say there is corruption, we have to prove to you.

And Tun did not have any proof that Najib was corrupt when Tun was campaigning for him?

I heard about it but I did not have any proof at all.

Tun has had a contentious history with the Malaysian royalty which is a matter of public record. Does Tun really expect the rulers to be supportive considering this

past history?

I think the rulers are concerned about their own fate in the future. They see a trend which is not healthy for them. They are not supporting me; they are supporting the removal of Najib because he is doing things that is undermining the position of the rulers.

For example, you cannot declare an emergency without the consent of the Agong. He is now introducing a law which does away with the consent of the Agong. He himself will play that role. So this is one step of removing the role of the Agong. There maybe be others.

So what they are doing is not because of me or supporting me, it is because they know that the future is bad. I won't be around for very long but their future, their children's future, new sultans will be under the thumb of Najib and also under the thumb of future prime ministers. So they worry about that.

Why should opposition-leaning supporters trust Tun?

It is not a question of trusting me. It is a question of getting together to do something that we hold common views. Both the opposition and myself think that Najib is a problem for Malaysia.

If Najib is there, the opposition will suffer. If Najib is there, even Umno will suffer, the whole country will suffer. I think the opposition is not supporting me, they are interested in removing Najib. I have the same interest. It is okay to work together - only on that issue, not on other issues.

In the Citizens' Declaration there are also issues of corruption and reforming the system? Will Tun work with the opposition post-Najib to reform the system?

If it is necessary, I would. I have never tied myself to anything. I have been against Tunku Abdul Rahman, I have been against Anwar (Ibrahim), I have been against Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi) because they were doing things which were wrong.

I support right things. I don't support blindly my own party or my own leader. My leader, my party must do the right thing.

At this moment, Tun is relying on social media and the alternative press to get Tun's message across. Does Tun now think that restraining the press and controlling the media was detrimental to the political process?

There is no such thing as absolute press freedom. You can't give the press the freedom to go up to somebody and curse him, that will cause a lot of repercussions. That is what happened to Charlie Hebdo. They insulted the Muslims for no reason, the Muslims cannot fight against France, what they could do is kill the person.

So press freedom must be exercised with some degree of responsibility. You don't do something that will unnecessarily provoke other people. Personal freedom, you can't go up to a person and say your mother is a prostitute. Can you do that?

No, it is wrong, so press freedom is always limited. In this country, the sensitivity is within the races. If you go to one race and start urging that race to fight against the other race, does the government say, carry on? They are provoking those people, the results would be confrontation and violence, and this country will go to the dogs. So press freedom, even in Europe, has a limit. Even in America.

What is the difference Tun's restrictions placed on the press and Najib's?

He is concentrating on protecting himself, not the nation. Not the country's moral code. Because people were accusing him of wrongdoing and he thinks if people don't know about it, he can get away with it. So his idea is to stop people from knowing or discussing the wrong things he is doing. That is wrong.

I am not about helping myself. I could have helped myself, but during my time if you say something that is going to stir up trouble within the races, I will stop you.

What is Tun's response to criticisms that this is not about saving Malaysia but saving personal political hegemony?

If I wanted my family to succeed at the time I was wielding a lot of power, that was the right time to do it. I did not even allow my children to go into politics to hold any office in Umno because people would say that is nepotism.

But after I stepped down, I can't tell my children, sorry, you can't do anything because you might spoil my name. I have no right to do that. They do things on their own. People like them, okay. People don't like them, it is okay.

What has (son) Mukhriz done? He was elected, made the (Kedah) chief minister. Now he is removed. That is something that happens to him. Now, he has to fight his own battles.

But does Tun think that Mukhriz was removed because of the political fallout between Najib and you?

I think he (Najib) has every right to choose. Either he (Mukhriz) supports Najib and play safe or he tell Najib, what you are doing is wrong. But when you tell Najib what he is doing is wrong, he is going to go against you. That is a risk Mukhriz took, not me.

I am known for what I stand for. In fact, I am an embarrassment to him. Without me, he does not have to take a stand. If I say nothing about Najib's wrong handling of 1MDB, he would not have any problem with Najib.

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