

Q&A: Najib 'scared' he wouldn't be picked as DPM
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The former premier also answered charges that his sons had bigger government contracts than Pak Lah's son, Kamaluddin in this first of a three-part interview.

We'll kick this off with your recent comments on Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. You said that you expected him to be a one-term prime minister. Why did you say that?

Well, I thought that the better candidate was Datuk Najib (Abdul Razak, present deputy premier), because he had the highest vote (in the 2000 Umno party elections) and he has the ability. But I also thought that he was, maybe, a little bit young so he should give an older person a chance. That was why I decided on Abdullah.

You have made insinuations that Abdullah may not be qualified, that he may be a little incompetent, that he seems to sleep during meetings. Were you aware of his capabilities then?

If it is a comparison between him and Najib, I would say that he was less qualified. But I did not know about this desire (of Abdullah) to bring in his family in total disregard for the example that I tried to set - that the family has no role in the government.

(I also did not know he had) this idea that in order to prove yourself you have to disprove or demonise other people. I didn't expect that. I expected that the things we have agreed upon would be carried out. There may be changes in approaches, or even in policies, but the general policies of the party has to be carried out. What he has done is to go completely in the opposite direction. That was not something I expected.

When you say 'things that we agreed upon', was there an agreement in terms of (Abdullah) being a one-term prime minister? Or carrying on for a second term? Or was there a gentleman's agreement that...

No, I didn't say anything about being a one-term prime minister. But I did expect him to pick on Najib as his deputy. Of course, he took a long time to make that decision, and at one time, I thought that he was not going to. But there was no specific agreement or understanding as such. I had assumed that it would be so.

The so-called peace talks with Abdullah was about six months ago. You did set out a list of things that you had wanted him to do. How do you evaluate what had happened since?

Nothing that I had stressed was implemented or accepted. Instead, he practically went in the opposite direction.

One of your criticisms was that the government was not spending enough money. That was the first two or three years of Abdullah's administration. But you can see that in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, they are spending money.

Well, we don't see the money being spent. When you stop something, to restart is very

difficult. When we have this first, second, third, fourth (Malaysia Plans), they all merged into each other. The Eighth Plan would go into the Ninth Plan, because it takes time for the Ninth Plan to take off.

For example, if you want to develop a certain area, there will be a question of state government, there will be a question of acquisition of land, there will be a lot of protests, and all that. All those things take years, maybe three or four years. When you allocate money, it's not going to be spent until three or four years down the line.

We don't see the money being spent. What do you see? Even in the Iskandar Development Region (IDR in Johor), do you see anything happening? Do you see anything happening about building the (Johor-Singapore half-) bridge? Do you see anything happening about the (Penang) monorail?

We don't see it. They're all approved. They're all supposed to be done, including the (Ipoh-Padang Besar) double-tracking (project). Because you stopped it. Had you continued, you would be spending the money that you say you have now.

Going back to the peace plan, Abdullah said that your sons had bigger contracts than Scomi (an oil-and-gas company controlled by Abdullah's son Kamaluddin). He was alluding as well that under your leadership these sorts of things were happening and that your family also received government projects.

No. Certainly not during my time, I never gave my children any special boosts or anything like that, but they did business on their own, largely, not with the government agencies. I think he was making reference to Mokhzani's business.

(Mokhzani owns oil-and-gas engineering firm Kencana Petroleum. Half of Kencana's RM437 million earnings in 2006 came from Petronas and Petronas-linked firms. Mahathir is currently advisor to Petronas.)

I can swear to you that I have never said one word in his favour. And if he requires that I go into a mosque and hold the Quran and swear that I never advised Petronas to give anything to Mokhzani, I'm prepared to do so.

Could it be that Petronas had acted on its own because he is your son and you were then the prime minister?

No, I don't think so, I don't think so. I think Petronas (acts) against (my advice) - if Petronas thought that it was in my favour, the likelihood is that Petronas would act against it. I find that although I am advisor to Petronas, I have never been able to influence Petronas in any way. In fact, I know very little about Petronas.

What about when you were the prime minister at the time of the Asian financial crisis and were accused of effecting the Malaysian International Shipping Corp's 1997 bailout of Mirzan's Konsortium Perkapalan Bhd (PKB)? (MISC financed the arrangements by issuing shares to Petronas).

Mirzan has explained very extensively over this. He went to see (Petronas chief executive officer) Hassan Merican, hoping that he could have some working relations with MISC. It was Hassan Merican who proposed to buy up his company. In a way, it would solve his (Mirzan's) financial problems and he agreed. They had two people to evaluate and Petronas paid below the lowest evaluation.

He (Mirzan) sold it but he is still saddled with a lot of debts which he couldn't settle. Petronas made a good deal because they bought at the lowest price possible at a time when the seller was in trouble. Then they made money operating it, and they sold it for more than twice the price. So Petronas had a good deal.

Wouldn't you agree that this didn't look good - the fact that you were the prime minister and your son benefitted from the state-owned petroleum company?

There was nobody (else to buy) and he wanted to sell to foreigners - I think that was not a good idea. Genting Group wanted to buy only the tankers (of KPB), and that would not solve his (Mirzan's) problem. During that time, there was nobody who could buy. The only solution was Petronas, because Petronas had the money.

At no time you were consulted over this?

I was not involved in any way. That was his (Mirzan) negotiations with (Petronas). Of course, Anwar (Ibrahim, former deputy premier) says (in 1999) I took RM2 billion of government (money). There was no government money involved.

How about the talk that your son Mukhriz's company, Opcom, received (during your premiership) a RM200 million contract from Telekom Malaysia to supply fibre optics materials?

Who would buy fibre optics except Telecom? Where (else) are you going to sell? He produced these things, and the price was good. Of course, immediately after I stepped down, the contract was cancelled and it was given to somebody else who was not even a bumiputera.

It looks like the other way is true, that if you are not related to the prime minister, you don't get it. You must be related to the prime minister.

So you expect that Pak Lah would continue a few more terms?

Well, people are voting and every election they are winning. In Ijok (state by-election), of course, they will win. If they lose it, it is because of (Selangor Menteri Besar Dr Mohd) Khir Toyo, if they win, it is because of the prime minister.

Assuming you had appointed Najib as prime minister and he stood for elections in 2004. Would the result be the same?

I think it would be the same. There was a kind of euphoria at that time when I stepped down, people were very sentimental and thought greatly of what has been done to the country, and I think that also had some influence, not just as (former information minister) Khalil Yaacob said, 99 percent (of the victory) was due to the prime minister. I think that if I left this country in shambles, you put the prime minister there, he's not going to win.

Do you still think that Najib is the better candidate? Or have you changed your mind on that?

I think if Najib is not so afraid of losing his position if he displeases the prime minister, he would make a good prime minister.

At the moment, he is being attacked from all sides.

Everybody now is trying to secure his own position.

Given the fact that Najib is embroiled in the Altantuya (murder) case as well as the defense contracts involving the submarines and fighter jets...

It's up to him to defend himself. He says he can defend himself so...

Apart from Najib, is there anybody else?

It could have been Muhyiddin (Yassin, agriculture minister), it could have been anybody. The main thing is, you must dedicate yourself to developing the country, not to developing yourself, not to make money for yourself or your family, or things like that. Of course, you can't prevent entirely your family from doing things for themselves. But it becomes too obvious when all members of your family has got a share in this or that. I think that is not good.

I suppose that advice goes to Najib as well.

Yes, it does. It goes to everyone, not just Najib.

What about the talk that Najib has been trying to meet you?

Najib can meet me any time, but there has been no requests whatsoever. In London, I did not meet him. He did ring me up just to say 'how do you do?'

Have you met Najib since you stepped down?

In the mosque, yes. I met him before he was appointed (deputy prime minister). He used to come and see me.

Was he worried about that before he was appointed?

He believed that if I don't push too hard, he would get it because he thought I might annoy Pak Lah (Abdullah).

There was talk at the time that Pak Lah had wanted Muhyiddin instead.

Yes. I think he (Najib) was scared of that.

Did you pressure Pak Lah to appoint Najib?

When I was prime minister, yes, I wrote to him. He said that he could not decide until he becomes the prime minister. Even after he became prime minister, I think he was aware that I was pushing for Najib.

What about after you stepped down?

After I stepped down, not much (pressure). I didn't do anything.

Why do you think Najib would be a better prime minister? You think he would carry out the government policies that you have set in place?

I have watched the performance of my ministers. I know which one can do what, which one cannot do. I can decide which one is better than which one.

Is it because you owe something to Najib's father (Tun Abdul Razak Hussain, the second prime minister who brought Mahathir back from the wilderness and suggested that he be appointed deputy premier when Hussein Onn took over)?

Oh, yes. That also. I think it would be normal to be grateful. Tun Razak has done me a good turn. Provided, of course, that Najib has the qualities. If he doesn't have the qualities, I'm not going to select him either. But he has the right qualities. In addition to that, I became prime minister at least indirectly due to Tun Razak.

Najib has a bit different worldview than yours. He's not as critical of the Western world as you are. Maybe his government policies would also be a bit different.

I think our worldviews will be slightly different, but by and large, they are more or less the same. I wouldn't say, for example, that Najib would drop the (half-)bridge. He was talking about building the bridge to the very last moment.

What do you think about the allegations of the defence kickbacks in the purchase of the French submarines and Russian fighter jets? Were you aware of this when there was a buying spree towards the tail-end of your tenure? Were there talks then that outside parties were being brought in to act as go-betweens, and funds were being channeled out?

I don't know. The problem is, we bought some things from Russia, and the Russians have appointed local agents so we have to work through local agents. There were several who claimed to be local agents. That, I wouldn't be bothered about. That is for the Ministry (of Defence) to decide.

But the thing is, we go through a local agent, and of course, we should have gone direct and not go through local agents, but then, you will have your officers doing it, and when you have your officers doing it, then there will be the accusations that your officers are also corrupt.

Could we say this is a common procedure then - it goes on everywhere? Are we agreeing that there could be kickbacks, given all the way up to the minister himself?

It could happen, but it is a case of watching the minister.

As a prime minister, you should have done that, right?

I did. During my time, I did not hear these kinds of things.

Maybe people were afraid to bring it up during your time.

Well, that is the people's fault if they don't bring it out. There was no Malaysiakini.com at that time to bring up nasty things, and you know what I think about Malaysiakini.

What do you think about Malaysiakini?

It's a useful medium. I never entertain hatred for people forever. There are people who tried to pull me down, I have appointed them into the cabinet and they have become prime ministers. These are the people who tried to stab me in the back. You see, I don't harbour

these things forever - (that) when I quarrel with a person, I will never talk again.

I can make up with Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah, former finance minister) who had tried to pull me down. I have appointed Musa (Hitam, former deputy premier) to various posts. Of course, Rais Yatim (culture and heritage minister), Abdullah Badawi, all of them were re-admitted into the cabinet and who were promoted.

So malaysiakini is good when it is good. When it is bad - I will tell you when you're bad. I don't mince my words.

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