

Q&A: Rafidah should be 'removed'
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In this second of a three-part series, Mahathir also expressed shock that he was 'cut off dead' by his friends. 'We were together for 20 years. Why am I cut off like that?'

Parti Keadilan Rakyat's Khalid Ibrahim is running in Ijok. What do you think of him? (The interview took place before the by-election)

He was heading (state-owned investment agency) PNB (Permodalan Nasional Bhd) before and he left because he thought he could do good business with Guthrie Group and all that. There were times when he couldn't settle his debts. I gave him time - against the wishes of PNB, I gave him time. After that I stepped down. What happened after I stepped down, I don't know.

Both Anwar and Khalid are talking about changing the pro-bumiputera New Economic Policy. In some sectors in Johor, the bumiputera quotas were recently withdrawn. What do you think of this?

If you want to do away with the NEP, it must be done gradually - on a case-by-case basis. I had myself decided that the (public university) quotas for bumiputeras should be done away with and we go on the basis of merit because I thought the time had come and the bumiputeras were not using it. So we might as well withdraw it. But there are other things which I think you still need some special considerations. Wholesale withdrawal of the NEP, I think, is not a good idea at all.

Do you agree with the argument that if we continue with the NEP it would be detrimental to the bumiputeras - that it would be better for the bumiputeras to scrap it?

If you look all around you, all the bumiputeras that you see - whether professionals or in business, anywhere they are working - they are all there because of the NEP. We gave them more opportunities to get education, to get training, to get opportunities. Yet, there are some of them who sell APs (approved permits to import cars) and things like that.

But there are others who made it. You look at the papers today. There are a lot of bumiputera names (in the news). Where do they come from? They were not the sons of millionaires. Some of them were from the kampungs. Because we gave them the opportunity, they have made good. I go everywhere and bumiputeras come up to me and say, 'Thank you because I'm the product of the NEP.' And they are successful. Without the NEP, I don't think they would have made it.

Do you think we should continue the NEP as is? Or revamp it? Or slowly and gradually phase it out?

I think we should restudy it because there are certain weaknesses that have to be corrected. There are still certain areas where you have to preserve this affirmative action and certain areas where we should discard (it). If you start selling APs, take away the APs. Why are you giving away APs, and not protecting bumiputeras who are very prone to selling off their land?

There is also the argument that the bumiputeras are finding it harder to compete.

The NEP somehow provides them the cushion, and some argue that it is time to throw away the crutches.

I've talked about it often enough but I also tell the bumiputeras that you have to prepare yourselves. When you get APs but you make no effort to learn how to trade in motorcars, then you should take away the APs. But if you are prepared to learn, we are prepared to teach you how to make use of the APs in order to develop competitiveness. That is where we should focus now. Get them to be trained because a lot of them have been trained and have been successful.

But a lot of others, not only were they not trained but they were encouraged to do the wrong things by the ministry. When the ministry gives thousands of APs to one person, knowing full well that person is selling the APs, that is aiding and abetting abuse of the NEP.

How can you stop such abuses of the NEP?

Very simple. Remove the minister (International Trade and Industry Rafidah Aziz).

How come it has not be done already?

I don't know. That is a mystery.

On the same topic, what do you think of the cabinet today. Are they as vibrant as they were under you?

Most of them were appointed by me. Now, it is 'safety first.' You have to save yourself. 'Never mind what happens to the country, never mind what happens to the Malays, never mind what happens to anybody, I must remain a minister. I must remain deputy minister. I must be the 'ketua bahagian' (party division chief). I must be the 'calon' (candidate) for the next election. What happens to others doesn't matter. What happens to the country doesn't matter.'

They argue, 'If I am not elected, I will not be able to contribute.' What are you contributing? You are not contributing anything.

Wouldn't that be the same during your time?

No. During my time, if they don't contribute, they don't get it (the position). They know me, and they contribute.

If the prime minister wants you to contribute, you will contribute. But if the prime minister doesn't care, and each one is for himself, and if each one doesn't please me I'm going to get rid of (him), not because he is not contributing but because he doesn't please me, then you are going to spend time trying to protect your pants.

Going back to the AP issue, this minister, Rafidah, was also embroiled in corruption allegations during your time. You could have taken action at that time.

Action was taken.

No.

Action was taken. They - the Attorney-General's Chambers - dropped the charges on her.

If the AG dropped charges, that is the AG's decision. But the fact is that I never stopped any investigation. She was complaining like mad that the ACA (Anti-Corruption Agency) people used to go into her office and demanded this, demanded that, and that they were rough on her. I didn't say anything.

There were accusations that you actually sat on the investigation papers.

No. I didn't. How can I sit on them? The investigation papers do not come to me. It's the decision of the head of the ACA. The (former) head of the ACA (Shafie Yahya) was actually against me. After I stepped down, he went to court to run me down. They don't like me. (Shafie had testified in the Anwar trial that Mahathir had ordered him to close his investigation against ex-Economic Planning Unit director-general Ali Abul Hassan)

Legally, perhaps, you're correct. But morally, don't you think you had the responsibility to remove (Rafidah) simply because she has been stained (by such accusations)?

It's not fair - to find that there is no case against (her) and (yet) to take action against that person. I have removed some people based on general complaints.

Why didn't you do the same for her?

It depends on the case.

It's not just Rafidah, I suppose, that you're talking about. It's various other senior ministers.

I have removed MBs (menteri besars), I have...

We still have people like (works minister and MIC president) S Samy Vellu there. We know of the complaints against him.

You ask MIC what they would do if I removed Samy Vellu. MIC is scared stiff of Samy Vellu.

So it's political repercussion factor then? It's got nothing to do with...

When it comes to the head of a component (Barisan Nasional) party, I don't have that much liberty to pick who the head should be or to remove the head from being in the cabinet. You can see that all the heads of all the component parties are in the cabinet, not because I chose them, but because they were chosen by their party.

What you're saying is that you have to appoint them (the leaders of BN component parties) to the cabinet. There's very little choice. So what does that reflect about our political system today?

There is a saying - a country gets the government that it deserves. If you are a member of a party and you are unwilling to say that your leader is wrong, to choose a better leader, then you deserve a bad leader. Whether it is fear of the bad leader, or whatever...

Even if it is a dictator, if they (people in other countries) really want to remove their dictator, they are prepared to stick their necks out. Here, it is not even a case of sticking your neck out. You won't even stick your little finger out. Everybody is playing safe. If I go against the chief, he's going to hammer me. Then I won't get contracts, I won't be 'ketua bahagian' (party

division chief).

Why do you think this culture has evolved?

We know that now, in particular, people have been removed, have been threatened, have received phone calls, have been told not to say this (or that). There have been instances that you have been called out, and told off, and told that if you feel that you cannot agree, you better get out.

So there is a climate of fear...

It is happening - there is a climate of fear.

Wasn't there a climate of fear during your time also?

If there was a climate of fear, how come Tengku Razaleigh goes against me, Musa goes against me, Anwar goes against me? Anwar tried to bring me down when he was still in the cabinet. If there was a climate of fear, he would not have been accusing me of cronyism and things like that.

Some people look at Umno today and say that there was a generation of leadership, including yourself, Anwar, Musa, who were very strong leaders. They look now at Abdullah and Najib, and they look (at those) after Najib, and they see people who are playing it safe. It looks like the country will have a tough time in the next 20 years. What do we have to do to move beyond this?

It's our choice. This is a democratic country. At least there is that much to admit. If people want to vote, they can vote for the best candidate. But if they vote (thinking that) 'This is my party, I don't care who they put there, even if it's a piece of log, I'm going to vote for the party because this is my party, and the other candidate is from another party', then of course, you are supporting things which you shouldn't be supporting.

You think there will come a stage where things are so bad in Umno or BN that it's okay for people to vote for opposition parties PAS or PKR or DAP, just to create a little bit more openness in the system?

If they do that, they will have to accept that they deserve PAS, they deserve DAP. But maybe before they reach that stage, we (Umno) can take corrective action within the party.

So you're saying there's still room for corrective action and reforms within Umno.

That is why there is no election of leaders until after the election. I was leader of this party many times after the elections, and at that time you are very powerful, because you will be appointed the prime minister. You are going to determine who is going to be your deputy, who is going to be the ministers, who are going to be the chief ministers. At that time, you can do what you like. You can so structure it at party elections.

So if there's going to be change at all, it (election of party leaders) has to be done before the general elections. It should be done before the general election.

So you still believe Umno members are open to such ideas? Removing the president?

They have tried to remove me before. I got only 42 votes majority - you remember that. You keep saying that I was like that (being authoritarian). But was I like that before? When they were campaigning against me, did I stop them from going around? Now I am stopped. I cannot go anywhere. People who invited me get phone calls telling them to destroy the invitations. Today, Umno members are scared stiff.

You know that I was head of my division (Umno's Kubang Pasu division in Kedah) for umpteen years. Yet, for RM200 I was dumped. And the people who complained, up til now, was there any hearing about this corruption, which includes, of course, the leader itself?

This cannot have happened because of one, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The cabinet comprises most of the people you appointed.

During my time, they wouldn't do this thing because I wouldn't allow them. But when you allow them, it is the top man who makes the decision.

You had a hand in creating that structure where the top man has the power to make all the decisions.

If I created that structure, there wouldn't have been any contest against me. I keep on repeating this - during my time, there were people in my cabinet who were dead against me. They're still there. They wouldn't be there if I was vindictive.

You went against me, so now I'll throw you out. But they came back. They were appointed ministers. I thought that they were contributing to the party. Whether they contributed to me is irrelevant. If you contribute to the work of the party and the government, you're eligible. I cannot have my own personal feelings going in between this good decision.

Are you disappointed by the fact that the people you have appointed in cabinet have betrayed you and are now not supporting you?

Well, of course, I have to be disappointed. When I stepped down, I thought I was going to have a good time being at social meetings with these people. Maybe they might even ask me my opinion. But the moment I stepped down, I was cut off dead. They don't see me at all. From the first day, I was shocked. I thought these were my friends. We were together for 20 years. Why am I cut off like that?

Then I realised that I was not allowed to speak. I spoke at some places but after that, I tested them to see what would happen if I tried to become a representative from my division. You see what they did? Have you ever seen this being done ever before in my time? That I didn't want so and so, that I paid money to block certain people - I didn't do that. A lot of people who came to the Umno general meeting, some of them hated me like anything, and they were still there.

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