

Q&A: I'm not a Muslim Hadhari. I'm a Muslim, period
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In this final part of his interview with malaysiakini, former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad also talks about logging scandal involving a Chief Minister and about the house belonging to Mugabe in Malaysia.

Sarawak chief minister (Abdul) Taib Mahmud has been linked to some logging (corruption) issues. You've known him for some time. What do you think is happening with Taib?

I think the Chinese community (in Sarawak) seems disillusioned. That's why in the last (state) election, they did not vote for SUPP (Chinese-based component party in Sarawak BN). But the Malays seem to be quite contented.

Is it time for Umno to go into Sarawak?

I don't think it should go into Sarawak and 'kacau' (stir) the pot there. We went into Sabah because of an emergency. During an election (1990 general elections), Pairin (Kitingan) pulled out, so I had to go to Sabah. But in Sarawak, I think it is up to the prime minister whether he wants to go to Sarawak or not.

Would it be a good idea to go into Sarawak?

I wouldn't know.

There is talk of Umno setting up pro-tem committees in Sarawak.

(Former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and Defense Minister) Abang Abu Bakar wanted Umno to go there before. I didn't want to disturb the situation in Sarawak. At that time, Japan Times didn't report anything. Malaysiakini also was not around.

Taib Mahmud has been around a long time. You think he should step down now?

Well, that's for him to decide. I always believe one should not overstay one's welcome. If you overstay, people might dislike you.

Another long-time leader is Robert Mugabe (president of Zimbabwe). Do you still consider him a friend?

He is my friend. But he has his own politics. He has his own situation. I'm not the best person to assess the problems that he faces. But from what I see in Africa, you may change leaders but you don't change anything. You see changes in leadership in many of the African countries.

There was a rumour that when he resigns, he may seek asylum here in Malaysia, and that he has a house already in Langkawi. Is there any truth to that?

No house in Langkawi but if he wants to seek asylum, why not? He's a friend. We have no quarrel.

Have you met him lately?

Not lately.

But the government does not recognise political asylum.

Some people come here. We don't legally give them political asylum, but a lot of Acehnese people come here, a lot of people from southern Thailand come here. We are quite flexible. It's not a special protection for asylum seekers or anything like that.

Talking about southern Thailand, we're seeing more violence there.

It's difficult in southern Thailand. If there's just one group struggling, then it's easy. You can just deal with that one group. But these are dispersed within many, many small groups. Some are acting on their own. Then, there is a mix of some people who take advantage in order to rob, threaten people and all that. The situation is very big. Of course, there is this accusation that the military has been abducting people. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not.

There have been allegations that some of these rebels have been trained in Malaysia.

They are not being trained in Malaysia. That I know for sure during my time, I think even now. I can't see this government doing any training for any rebels anywhere.

There have also been accusations that they are linked to PAS.

Before, they used to cross over the border to vote for PAS. That is because these people are related to the people in Kelantan. They have relatives. Sometimes they have both (Malaysian and Thai) identification cards. During elections, PAS goes there. The Thai government allows PAS to campaign, because they talk about religion. We will have to talk about politics so we couldn't campaign there. As a whole, they seem to incline towards PAS because PAS seems sympathetic to them.

You're talking about foreigners voting for PAS. In Sabah, there are claims that ICs are given to foreigners to vote for Umno.

There could be because in Sabah it was at one time called the Wild East of Malaysia. People do funny things. Initially when they had democracy in Sabah, BN used to win 100 percent because anybody who wants to stand against the Alliance (precursor to BN) could not reach the registration officers. Before they reach (them), some things (always) happened.

You have created a situation in Sabah where there are more foreigners than locals.

Sabah is a border area like Kelantan. Traditionally, the Bajaus for example, used to come and go as they like because they never recognised the boundary between the Philippines and Malaysia or between British North Borneo and Indonesia. These people come and go, and some of them have been staying there for 30 years. The children cannot go to school because we do not recognise them as citizens. This is very unfortunate.

We have been having this kind of problems all the time, and it's going to get worse - in every country - because borders today are very porous. No way you can stop a few million Indians migrating to Europe, a few million Arabs migrating into France. You cannot stop it today.

But they accused Umno of giving all these ICs to foreigners in order to...

Not Umno as such. There may have been a few fellows who did it, but it was not Umno.

The government?

The government, no. Certainly not. Some people with an interest in doing so may have, maybe for money.

There were claims that there was a special meeting involving former deputy home minister Megat Junid Megat Ayob, involving the police, and where these things were discussed. There were very specific allegations where things were orchestrated for political ends. Do you have any knowledge of this so-called Project M?

No. Not me.

So Project M is not Project Mahathir?

It's nice to have 'M'. At one time, there was even an MM government.

People are complaining about the switch from teaching Maths and Science in Bahasa Malaysia to English. In hindsight, do you think it was a good decision?

I still hold to the belief that if we want to make progress, if the Malays want to make progress, they must master English and they must learn science and mathematics in English. I would like to see a person who is totally illiterate in English, or any other language except Malay, make progress in science and study science. We can learn the elementary sciences - that this is oxygen, this is hydrogen - but once you want to move into higher sciences, you want to be a Nobel laureate...

But we don't have many students going into science. Most of our students seem to be branching into arts. What's the idea of actually forcing this on them. People have been saying our pass rates over the past four years are not indicating that we are doing well on this. Something must be wrong, either with the implementation of the policy or the policy itself.

If you want to do something, you can do it. Teaching science in English is not difficult, especially now with software, with all kinds of aids that we have. To learn English today is very easy. The teacher may not be able to speak English, but he can use software and he can learn just as the student learns.

I've tried to learn French. I can't speak French very well, but they have software today which can teach you very, very quickly. Within two to three months, you should be able to speak French. Children learn very fast, and they can learn English very quickly.

The Arabs learned Greek language to learn Greek science, Greek philosophy, Greek mathematics, translated that into Arabic and for 700 years they were the ones who mastered these subjects.

The Europeans in those days were living in the Dark Ages. When they wanted to copy the Muslims, there was no way for them to do so unless they understood Arabic. They learned Arabic and they went to Cordoba, they went to Baghdad, looked at the libraries, looked at all the Arabic books, and later on translated (these materials) into their language, into Latin, and

from Latin into English and French and German.

That's fine but you've still got schools with broken computers and the government is unwilling, or unable, to even replace them.

That is administration. It's not government policy. The government decides that if your computer breaks down, there are ways of replacing it, if you want to replace it. If you don't want to replace it, then of course, there is no money.

Like the (half-)bridge, you say you have no money. So now, you have a CIQ (Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex), which is wasted money - RM1.4 billion doing nothing. That is not a waste.

A few years ago (In September 2001) you declared Malaysia an Islamic state. Given that there has been increased religious tensions lately, what do you think of that declaration in hindsight?

It has to nothing to do with the Islamic state, this increase in tensions. It's just because you don't explain things properly to the other side. During my time, I opposed hudud laws because they are not hudud laws not because I oppose religious laws. I'm opposed to their interpretation of hudud laws because they are not based on the teachings of Islam.

We've got a situation where mothers are being separated from kids and wives separated from their husbands. What's your solution to that?

Go back to the teachings of Islam. These things become a problem because of interpretations. Go back and find out what is it that Islam wants you to do in such cases. Go back to the Quran. It's there.

Do you agree with what the religious authorities did? That R Subashini should be separated from her children?

Is that what the Quran suggests? I don't think so.

You don't think so?

I don't think so. The problem is that it is difficult for non-Muslims to even talk or question this. We are living in such a climate of fear, that it's not easy to be up front in this debate...

Are you admitting that we are living in a climate of fear? Before, we didn't have this problem. Now, it's getting more and more (problematic), it's getting worse and worse. It started with your Islamic nation declaration.

No, Islamic nation is just an Islamic nation.

Much of these problems started after you declared Malaysia as...

There are many Islamic nations. What is the definition of an Islamic nation?

According to you, it's a country ruled by the majority and where Muslims are the majority. As such, being secular, we are still an Islamic nation. That is your definition. But down on the ground, we are looking at since...

It's up to the government to counter such things.

We've got Islam Hadhari to counter it...

I don't know what is Islam Hadhari. I'm not a Muslim Hadhari. I'm a Muslim, period.

Someone said a nation of sheep begets a government of wolves. Malaysians are sheep, and I think you recognise this after your 22 years.

No, no. I had a tough time. I very nearly lost an election in 1999. I didn't do very well during some of the elections. I did well in some elections. It's not always a straight line like that or that, or goes up like that (indicating with his hand). If you care to study, I went through five elections. It was not easy.

You have to go around and explain to people. This is wrong. This black eye (episode where Anwar appeared with a black eye after being assaulted in detention) is black eye, but what the government is doing is good. But people say, 'Well, the black eye is very important.' So they voted black eye. You see? I can't do anything. But now, (it's) 'be careful. If you don't vote me in, you'll be punished...'

Do you still think you're relevant to Malaysian politics?

I'm not relevant anymore. I'm a retired man.

So you're happy to just being retired.

I'm retired, but I'll open my mouth once in a while... to talk to Malaysiakini.com.

One last question - on the Internet. You decided not to censor the Internet, which was a good thing, but it was very unlike of you.

I was forced to say 'I will not censor the Internet'.

You were forced to say that?

Yes. The (Multimedia Super Corridor) International Advisory Panel (IAP) told me that you must not censor the Internet. Even at that time, I wanted to censor the Internet because I think the Internet is undermining moral values.

They put on the Internet all those pornographic, dirty pictures and things like that. If a young boy, a teenager, sees all those things, he goes crazy and he rapes little children and rapes even his grandmother. These things should be taken out, and I did suggest that we raise this matter in the UN. Make it an international crime. If anybody puts dirty things on the Internet, he should be prosecuted.

So why did you decide not to censor the Internet?

Because I had to satisfy these people who would (otherwise) say Malaysia is not a free country. At that time, it wasn't so bad. Now, it's really, really bad.

In hindsight, was that the right decision?

I think even at that time, I had to force myself. Sometimes you are under pressure from

foreign (investors). We want their cooperation, we want to develop the Multimedia Super Corridor, and these are very influential people. They said, 'Don't censor the Internet,'and I said, 'Okay, if you say so.'

But I was never convinced. Even now I'm not convinced. I don't mean censor contrary views. Contrary views is okay, but censor those filthy and dirty things.

Have you ever thought of doing your own blog?

Somebody suggested to me (to blog), but I don't have the time. I have to depend on you.

Would you like to do a column for Malaysiakini?

A column, no. Occasional interviews, yes.

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