

**KJ: I'd feel cheated if BN Youth Lab not taken seriously**  
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Many who know Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar would say that he poured his heart and soul into the BN Youth Labs.

It all started on a Wednesday afternoon on Feb 17 when the Umno Youth leaders paid a courtesy call to party president and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak at his office in Putrajaya.

NONE lamenting about the need to know and to get closer to the youth of the country nowadays, the premier then ordered the movement's chief Khairy (left) to set up a special lab - along the likes of those set up by the Performance, Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) - to find out what makes Malaysian youths tick.

And after six months, a two-prong in-depth study which included focus groups, online and telephone polls, and close to 8,000 respondents, the results were released two weeks ago in a townhall session in Kuala Lumpur.

However, that still did not stop much scepticism and cynicism, some even from Umno, that the lab was just a "syok sendiri" (egocentric) exercise or that "PM's not going to take this seriously anyway".

In the first of a three-part interview with Malaysiakini, Khairy revealed just how much he had invested in the BN Youth Lab, and why it would not work if it became a collective effort with the opposition parties.

'No point obsessing about channels'

Khairy, as much as he had been going around promoting his BN Youth Lab report, has also had his fair share of battles with perceptions about the lab.

While he has said that Najib himself has been quite receptive to the ideas put forward in the report, it is undeniable that even some older Umno leaders and ministers themselves think of Khairy as a young turk.

Some have even gone as far as to lament in private that the 34-year-old has not been using the 'right' (read: traditional) channels, which is, to voice them privately within the confines of the party.

However Khairy scoffed at the allegations, saying that he had indeed brought up matters in Umno supreme council meetings.

"But if we're too obsessed with channels, we are not going to see change. We'd be too obsessed with form. This is about contestation of ideas. If ideas are good, then we should adopt it no matter what," he said.

NONE And the BN Youth Lab findings are not mere ideas.

Backed up with hard numbers and statistics, it's empirical data staring at readers in the face collected through several painstaking processes.

"The BN Youth Lab is systematic. It's not like because I buka puasa with 40 young people, I am in the pulse of what makes young people tick. You have to sit down and do things systematically. Maybe because of my age, I have more empathy," he reflected.

When asked if he would be terribly upset if the ideas were not implemented, the normally articulate and poised Oxford graduate chuckled before pausing for reflection.

"I would be disappointed if they're just brushed aside, or not given due consideration by relevant ministries and agencies. Because in the government, there is a disconnect between what the top leadership likes and wants and how it's finally implemented at ground level.

"I don't want the PM to say 'these are great ideas', and then the minister says that 'these are just a bunch of kids'," he said.

maac official launch 240209 abdullah badawiHowever, Khairy who has been in politics for years, not to mention seeing the inner workings of governance at the highest level, courtesy of his father-in-law and the fifth prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (left), knows that there is only so much that the government can do.

"Sure, there are some suggestions which may be difficult to implement due to operation or budgetary reasons, but some are reasonable for various ministries.

"If there is inaction on their part, I'd feel cheated because I was asked to do this. So when I go do this, to find some touchpoints on what the young want to see the government introduce, I sell it to the young people and I tell them 'I don't care if you support BN or not but we want to hear your views'.

Defeated expectations

"And for it to suddenly not happen, it's a case of defeated expectations for these people. And it would be more detrimental, compared to if we had not done anything at all," he said.

Despite the tag of a BN Youth Lab, Khairy insisted that the lab itself is far from being a political vehicle with many of the permanent members being apolitical, and even some being "Opposition-sympathisers".

Still, being a realist himself, Khairy knows that some ministers and secretary-generals of the ministries are unconvinced despite the 'BN' tag.

"What more if we had some Opposition figures in there? Surely the ideas won't even stand a chance. Now I have had the opportunity to present the report to the PM.

NONE"The BN label helps push the implementation. Whether or not, that's up to the government," he said.

Despite all that, Khairy is confident that at least some of the suggestions will end up seeing the light of day.

With ideas in the pipeline on setting up portals and websites to monitor the implementation of the ideas, he is still insistent that the BN Youth Lab should still remain to do follow up tracking polls as well as tackle micro topical issues.

"I don't want it to just end at the townhall meeting. I still want us to lobby and push and

pressure the government to implement the suggestions," he said.

And website or no website, it is obvious that Khairy who is often touted as a 'rebel within the party' will be keeping a close eye on the government to see where the suggestions do end up.

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