

Khair Toyo: Umno has lost touch with reality
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Former Selangor Menteri Besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo said he knew it all along that Barisan Nasional (BN) would suffer heavy losses in the March 8 polls, long before the date arrived.

In an interview, he revealed how he had learnt of the impending defeat. However, as the 'general' of his 'army', he could not disclose his forebodings to his 'troops'.

khir toyo interview 280408 04 "I started getting negative feelings when (former Finance Minister and Umno treasurer) Daim Zainuddin said five states would fall to the opposition. As Selangor Umno chief, I couldn't say it out loud as it would have dampened the spirits of party members," he said.

Instead, he saw it as his duty to suppress negativity and to focus supporters on slugging it out in the polls. Still, he dropped hints that, while the polls might appear easy to win, this would be a difficult task.

Selangor rode the Pakatan Rakyat wave alongside Penang, Kedah, Perak and Kelantan, while the BN drowned in its worst ever defeat.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah 110907 Khir pointed to the federal government's arrogance and insensitivity to the needs of the people, even after he had sent up pleas to Umno president and premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (photo).

"Suggestions were made, but there was no reaction. Point taken, but where were the responses?" he said.

He criticised the information dissemination mechanism in Umno, saying the central leadership did not get the right information and therefore could not devise a campaign strategy to win over voters.

"The reports given to the leadership came from only one party, for example, Special Branch officers. These officers are often Malays and can only provide information regarding Malay voters, not the other races. So, it's hard for us to get real information," he said.

The election results, he said, are a reflection of Umno having lost touch with reality. This, leaves the party with no option but to tread the path of reform.

The following excerpts of the interview have been edited for clarity.

Let's start with your blog...

I have received good responses to my blog. I didn't expect (this). The comments are mainly positive ones like calls to reform the government.

khir toyo interview 280408 02 When I was the menteri besar, I did many things to reform the state government but the people failed to see this.

This caused confusion among the rakyat and this is when certain quarters came in to exploit the situation. It led to the people being misled (into thinking that we had not done enough for them) and as we all know, blogs or the Internet media are more credible than other forms of media.

What about the so-called 'cyber-war' between you and Muhammad Muhd Taib?

I wouldn't describe it as a cyber-war. As an Umno supreme council member and a blogger, I vowed in my first posting that I would tell the truth and I have been trained to tell the truth. Even though the truth is painful, I have no qualms about telling it. Even the Umno president has told all party members to tell the truth and that is what I am doing.

What is the reaction in Umno? You are among leaders deemed to be vocal and consistent with your views...

There are pros and cons to (being labelled as such), but I only wish to tell the truth..

What truth are you talking about? Are you talking about transition of power?

If that is what Umno members, bloggers and the rakyat want, we must express it and it is up to the leadership to decide how to react to it. Don't let things come to a point where the rakyat say that we are not delivering the right information. This is possibly one reason why Umno was defeated so badly in the March 8 polls. To me, truth is important.

So what is the problem? Why is it that the party top leadership did not get the right information? It was impossible for Umno to predict the election outcome. You managed to identify eight hot seats in Selangor and MCA disagreed with you.

Perhaps the reports given to the leadership came from only one party, for example, the Special Branch officers.

malaysia vote ballot box undi votingThese officers are often Malays and can only provide information regarding Malay voters and not the other races. So it's hard for us to get real information.

If you look at the March 8 results in Selangor, the swing was 35 percent, of which 30 percent was caused by Chinese voters. The swing from Malays was only 5 percent.

But you didn't predict this...

daim zainuddinI started getting negative feelings when Daim Zainuddin (photo) said that five states would fall to the opposition. As Selangor Umno chief, I couldn't say it out loud as it would have dampened the spirits of my party members.

As leaders, we have to refrain from giving our soldiers negative information. It may demoralise them. You have to analyse the information first...I was worried, I informed all division and branch chiefs of Selangor that the elections may look easy, but would be difficult to win.

Daim's statement came quite late, so how did the BN election machinery react to it?

We told them to work really hard for the elections. I'm (only) responsible for Umno (and not

other BN parties). Umno won 18 of the 20 seats (that went to) BN in Selangor. Maybe the over-confidence after BN's 2004 election victory created a negative impact.

Political parties must become the voice of the rakyat, not the government... (but) politicians responded on behalf of the government (on issues) like the (increased) price of fuel and basic goods, saying that the government can't do much about it. They began showing formulae used to calculate the prices when all the people wanted was for political parties to listen to them and address their problems.

We have to become the voice of the people but it's the other way around now. I hope that Umno Youth especially can become the voice of the people now.

Is this a suggestion for separation of government and political functions?

Umno does not form the government - the BN does. Umno members must represent the will of the people and must press the government to safeguard the interests of the people.

For example, I have been bringing up issues on the food crisis since 2002. Now we can see the early signs of a food crisis and we have to tell the government that the rakyat wants prices of basic goods to be reduced. The government must think of a way to reduce the prices by either increasing the number of import agents or opening up the market.

But so far Umno has not spoken of about this matter...

That is why we have to learn, we cannot depend on old methods any more. As leaders we have to admit our mistakes and change things. When I concede mistakes, I try to change and I hope that others will follow suit.

Back to the rice price hike, we have to open up the market so that rice can be imported. Maybe it will affect the income of local rice farmers, but why shouldn't we subsidise them?

Do you agree that the rice-import monopoly of Bernas (Padiberas Nasional Bhd) should be terminated?

rice paddy padi beras sacksYes, definitely...(and it's) not just with rice. For sugar and other basic food items, we have to open up the market to let the rakyat have the lowest price, while maintaining the income level of farmers.

In other countries, unemployed people receive financial help from their government. The same can be done here. The government can help supplement farmers' income when the price of rice drops. What we see now is that the rakyat has to pay a lot for basic goods, while farmers (enjoy subsidies).

How do you propose to reform a party like Umno, which has several million members?

We need to start. We must. In fact I was thinking, the separation between the party and the government must be clear. To me, the party president should concentrate on consolidating the party, as is done in India.

Here we have all the (heads of BN) component parties asking for government posts. If the PM gives me the presidency (of Umno), I would consolidate the party. And if the PM does something wrong, the party will tell him so.

Wouldn't it make the situation more complicated?

It is (a form of) check and balance.

When we look at separation of functions, we see that the higher one goes, the more government posts the person gets...

That is the problem. (We need to create) check and balance.

But it would prolong the journey...

Never mind. Reforms must be introduced. The most important thing is to never stop at introducing changes.

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