

**Khair Toyo: Blame the keris, not the broom**  
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The keris-waving incident that sparked an uproar among non-Malays may have contributed to the poor performance of Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) in the March 8 polls, said former Selangor Menteri Besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo.

Khir said it had created negative perceptions of Umno and possibly caused the swing in non-Malay votes towards the opposition.

khir toyo interview 280408 03 "We must admit our mistakes. If we don't, the rakyat will call us arrogant," he said in an interview.

Umno Youth head Hishammuddin Hussein had made an apology of sorts last week for drawing out and kissing a keris at the Umno Youth assembly last year.

He has since been criticised by party leaders like vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin and Umno Cheras division head Syed Ali Al-Habshee, who are of the view that the tradition should not be questioned by non-Malays.

Khir believe that if the gesture is offensive in some quarters and is seen to send out negative signals, then it should be stopped.

However, he discounted the notion that the broom incident also had an impact in causing the fall of Selangor to Pakatan Rakyat in the general election.

"Take a look at other states, they did not have similar incidents, yet they (too) lost. This is all part of the denial syndrome that we are suffering from and this is a huge problem for the party," he argued.

khir toyo broom award Khir had handed over brooms to under-achieving civil servants at an event for Selangor government staff last year.

In his defence, he said this was done to force civil servants to be more efficient in serving the people.

"When the people came to me and complained about the poor performance of civil servants and (this was also) highlighted in the media, I felt restless and worried. As a representative of the people, I will of course take action," he said.

The only mistake, he conceded, was "not to (gift-)wrap the broom".

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

The media reported that one of the factors that caused Selangor Umno to lose the state in the general election was the 'broom incident'. What are your comments?

I would like to explain. When the people came to me and complained about the poor

performance of civil servants and (this was) highlighted in the media, I felt restless and worried. As the representative of the people, I will of course take action. We reacted by creating a star rating system. If you get five stars, you'll be rewarded, but if you don't get a single star, you'll be warned.

We did this for five years and there were still no improvements. Then we 'froze' them at the headquarters and yet saw no improvements. We raised salaries and still there was no improvement. We took disciplinary action, and still no improvement.

As a leader, I had to solve this matter. I discussed it with my officers and some suggested that we give them a pair of (cheap) slippers, some suggested making them wear torn clothes, and some suggested that we give them brooms. Maybe the mistake was not to (gift-)wrap the broom, but this was not my doing. It was my officers who prepared everything, I was just there to hand over the 'gift'.

But do you agree that this incident contributed to the defeat of BN in Selangor?

I disagree. Take a look at other states, they did not have similar incidents, yet they lost. This is all part of the denial syndrome that we are suffering from and this is a huge problem for the party. We always say we are strong but actually we are not. We lost five states, and yet we say we are strong.

You mean that there were national factors...

70 percent of (the reasons for the electoral losses) came from national factors.

The defeat for BN has also been linked to your own arrogance, for example, in pursuing your 'zero-opposition' policy.

As a general of an army, I can't be telling my army that we are losing. Is it proper to tell your army that some will die in the battle? When Napoleon went to battle and knew that he was going to lose, he told his army that they would win. I cannot send out negative messages that will demoralise my soldiers.

hishamuddin hussein with keris 050805The keris issue has also been mentioned as a factor for BN's heavy losses.

This is a matter of perception. It depends on how we manage perceptions. Maybe it was a factor. We must admit our mistakes. If we don't, the rakyat will call us arrogant.

But as far as Umno's history is concerned, the keris was never used to rally Malay support. How did it suddenly become a rallying symbol for Umno?

I can't answer this because I was never involved.

Let's analyse it anyway. It is not just Umno Youth that uses the keris as a ceremonial item, but other Umno wings as well.

The keris perhaps is a symbol of power, a symbol of supremacy, but for the Malays it means nothing. Maybe it's different for the Chinese (which is why they look at it differently).

But it was never seen as symbol of supremacy for Umno before...

This is because it was never politicised by Umno before.

So do you agree that the keris culture should be eliminated?

Yes, why not? If it's negative, we should stop using it. We have to admit our mistakes. Admitting mistakes is a courageous thing to do.

What about your preparations to contest the Umno Youth leadership?

The response so far has been good. Though some might say I am an 'outside' contestant, I disagree. I was once an Umno Youth divisional head, I was once the Umno Youth national executive councillor. Any contestant who comes in late must work hard. But I feel...Insyallah (I can do it) because I have been thoroughly schooled politics-wise. I can offer experience. I have completed the full political cycle; not many politicians can parallel my situation.

I have a new motto for Umno Youth: 'Youth as the voice of the people and towards building the perseverance of the Malays'.

khir toyo interview 280408 04 Meaning that you want to bring Umno back to its old idealism?

We have to become the voice of the people, and not the government.

But the mechanism in Umno itself renders it impossible to speak freely, even Umno members itself cannot speak...

I am doing it.

Maybe one or two people...

I am talking and I will continue to do that. I believe that the voice of the youth is the voice of the rakyat.

But the culture in Umno itself? How do you cultivate courage in the party?

We must be brave to express the truth. We cannot be controlled. If we are controlled in an independent nation, it means that we are not free. Expressing ideas cannot be seen as a bad thing. As a supreme council member entrusted to be the voice of the people, I will continue to speak up. I might not be able to be direct in my expression. I am a local and as a local I am raised to be polite so I will say something like 'exit plan'.

To some, 'exit plan' is a euphemism for calling for the Umno president to step down. Do you have any expectations when it comes to this 'exit plan'?

I can't say I have any expectations. The president has the right to construct his own exit plan and according to his own timeframe, but transition of power is compulsory. In any leadership there must be transition of power. Sooner or later it will have to happen. If it's better to have it earlier, then do it. If you think it takes time, then you must explain the reasons.

But if Abdullah Ahmad Badawi an introduce measures to reform the system and his popularity increases as a result, would the exit plan still be necessary?

This is if we look at it from a long-term perspective. That is why, in my blog, I have stated that changing the president or the prime minister will not solve everything. The most important thing is reform of the system - reforming economic, education and inter-religion policies and reform the party.

umno 2007 agm primary 051107What is most important is that these measures will make Umno a sanctuary that the rakyat can rely on. If this does not happen, people will leave Umno, members will jump off. Maybe not the leaders but the members will.

The government must introduce real reform and a timeframe for implementation. Each leader in Umno who contests for posts must have some sort of plan or idealism. The rakyat can choose which plan they feel will benefit them the most, but we are not seeing this right now.

If this is done, there will not be a crisis of confidence in relation to the government. If this is done, even the (BN) component parties will lean on Umno.

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