

Shahrir: Reality behind 'Ketuanan Melayu'
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Aidila Razak & Christine Chan

As someone who has weathered political storms since 1973, Shahrir Samad has not just negotiated the tide of time, but has surfed his way into the digital age.

In an interview, he said that networking via the Internet need not be inevitable in politics, but that it is a powerful tool in bridging the generational and geographical gap.

Facebook aside (he has about 500 "good friends"), Shahrir (*left*) is also actively engaging civil society groups in getting his message across to the public.

And the message is simple - some may enter politics for money but, as it has been for the last 30 years, Shahrir is here to serve.

This underscores the Umno loyalist's understanding of the contentious term *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). Shahrir said that, in a democracy, the *tuan* (master) is actually a slave of the people.

His devotion to Umno, however, has not had any influence on younger brother Khalid - the Shah Alam MP - who joined politics under the PAS banner.

"All that is colouring... and flavour, but basically we both agree that politics is service, an act of altruism and our choice in life," he said, describing himself as a "liberal wearing an Umno mask".

Excerpts of the interview follow. The content has been edited for language and brevity.

Malaysiakini: How far do you view the influence of young voters and the Internet?

Shahrir Samad: Young voters are very important, not just now but in every election.

(In terms of the Internet) I understand that if I don't have a position, the column inches given to me (in a newspaper) will be less. Similarly, I will also suffer from the lack of exposure so I will just have to work harder from my divisional level. How do I then engage my voters, whether they are young or old? And those who don't even come out for community affairs? I will have to develop something, engage them in a different way.

So how do you engage these young people who are more active on the Internet?

I have my *Facebook* and blog. But I don't have *Twitter*. I am selective in adding friends but I have about 500 friends (to date). I am not out to make as many friends as possible. It depends on what you want to do.

Even if you have 5,000 friends, it's enough if (you have) 500 good ones. And not all of those in my *Facebook* are voters in Johor Bahru (JB) anyway. Some of my *Facebook* friends vote in JB but don't live there, so they keep up with what I do through the Internet.

Do you think it is inevitable that politicians will have to start using the Internet?

It depends on whether you are the kind who wants to be on the web. In the past, I engaged

with (Umno) branch leaders because they were also engaged with mosque and *surau* committees.

But now I am engaged with NGOs including Parent-Teacher Associations in schools, with mosque committees, social groups like women's groups, youth groups, and the differently-abled community. My engagement is not just political, but involves community organisations and other special interest groups.

Campaigning via the Internet is cheap, so perhaps this is a good alternative to the traditional methods which require more money...

This is an alternative but not a complete alternative. (To use *Twitter*) you have to keep doing many interesting things if you want people to follow your tweets.

Issues on the ground are quite serious and may not be interesting to everyone. If I talk about squatter development, I can see how (little) response this gets (in some quarters) when, to the people involved, it means the world. But people on the Internet may think, 'This is not so interesting, we prefer quarrels or scandals'.

Let's talk about 'Ketuanan Melayu'.

Ketuanan Melayu is an expression used to expand on what (one-time) Dr Ismail (Abdul Rahman) used to say, that the Malays are the core of the country - *Melayu teras negara dan Umno ialah teras Melayu*. *Ketuanan Melayu*, may sound like *teras*, but has negative connotations.

Maybe the word tuan is responsible for this...

If you look at it rationally and not emotionally, this *tuan* needs to work very hard for the people who were once slaves, because in a democracy, the slaves have more votes than the *tuan*.

I remember the days when I campaigned for (former Umno leader) Musa Hitam (*right*) when he was a MP. He always told me that, when we go inside a Chinese shop and talk to the *tauke* (owner), we can get his vote. But we should also remember that the workers have an equal vote and they may not agree with the *tauke*.

We can go into the semantics but that's a waste of time. You can argue that *tuan* means 'master', but how good a *tuan* can you be when you have only one vote? The so-called slaves also have votes and they can outnumber you. The responsibility that goes with *tuan*-ship is different in a feudal and a democratic system.

The way you explain it shows that you believe in responsibility, but this is different from how many others are using the term *Ketuanan Melayu*.

Maybe they were not allowed to explain as much.

Or they don't know how to explain it?

They don't know, or they don't understand. They just parrot it.

You are very loyal to Umno, while your brother (Khalid) is in PAS. What happened?

Do you think it's strange? I think (this happened) because I didn't go overseas. I went to Universiti Malaya. The issues were 1969, racial riots, New Economic Policy, Malay nationalism... so I am a product, a child of my generation. I cannot stop being who I am and (I was) influenced by people and the leaders around me at that time. My younger brother, Khalid, (*right*) is three siblings removed, a lot younger. At the time when he went to study (in Brighton, UK) it was the time of the Iranian revolution, Islamic fundamentalism...he learnt his Islam and politics in UK, so much so that when he came back to Malaysia he wanted to form an IRP. I went to see him and said, 'You want to form an Islamic R Party. What do you want R to be? Is it to be Republican or Revolutionary? Either ways it is going to be a non-starter'.

I suppose he thought his older brother was wise enough so he abandoned that plan and chose PAS. I think we are reflective of the changes and the generation in which we grew up. But to me, all that is colouring, the overall picture and the flavour, but we basically agree that politics is service, an act of altruism and our choice in life.

Your brother seems to be the poster child of moderate PAS.

Is PAS ever moderate? There's Moderate Umno and there's Moderate PAS...

That may be the way to go if you're looking for more votes today.

Yes, but you have to decide what you are and what you stand for. It may cost you and you may have to pay for it (but) there may be a time when people don't trust people who are moderate.

Once, people didn't want moderation. The more moderate you (were), the less trustworthy you (were seen to) be.

Do you mean that moderate people appear to have no conviction?

Perhaps. But to me, moderation is how life should be and the way of (political) service. Moderation makes you more believable, and it's not easy to be moderate.

It's not easy. Your brother is getting a lot of flak.

He gets a lot of flak but he also has his fan club. So at the end you have to see the sum of it, your personal objective and criteria for success. Whether you want to play to the gallery or do what you think is right. If you are moderate because you are playing to the gallery then you will be found out.

Has your brother toned down since his IRP days?

I won't know, I can't tell the difference. Others quite close to me are surprised at why he seems so moderate, so maybe it's a stance rather than real. There are people in PAS accusing him of a liberal wearing a PAS mask. I say that I am the liberal wearing the Umno mask, so maybe we should switch sides.

In any case...people have found out that things carry on whether or not you care about politics. It is not politics that tells you whether this country is prosperous enough. You have a job, you carry on with your job, and you are not affected by politics.

In fact, if everyone switches off and lets politicians work it out you'll find out that,

'hey...after five years, my business has grown, the market is there, my parents are happy, my in-laws are happy, even when no MP or party hack has come to see me'.

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