

RETIREMENT ON HOLD, THE SEARCH CONTINUES

Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud reluctantly stepped into Sarawak politics after being persuaded by an uncle. After almost 45 years of politics in a state of diverse races, religions and ethnic groups, he wanted to call it a day, but recent political developments seem to have cuffed him to the No 1 seat for a few more years, at least. Taib, an Australia-trained lawyer who turns 71 in May, became

a state assemblyman in 1963 before moving up the political ladder to become Chief Minister in 1981 amid a not-so-stable political climate where the chase for power was intense. In this exclusive interview with FIRDAUS ABDULLAH, a day after the conclusion of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu's 11th triennial general assembly, Taib shares his vision and aspirations for his land.

NST-18/2/2007

Q: You are seen to be too powerful, dictating everything in Sarawak.

A: Somebody obviously doesn't like me or my style. It doesn't matter. I've devoted myself to the future of Sarawak. I have no personal agenda. We are devoted to the idea of making Sarawak a successful member of Barisan Nasional. Outsiders don't seem to understand the way we do things here.

Q: Are you trying to create a dynasty?

A: Do you know that I objected to my brother becoming a candidate? You don't know that but a lot of people, including the newspapers, point fingers at me. Some align themselves with certain disgruntled politicians and help grind their axe.

I've always kept my close family, including my children, out of politics. But before the last state elections, grassroots party members were adamant that my brother (Ali Mahmud) should represent them.

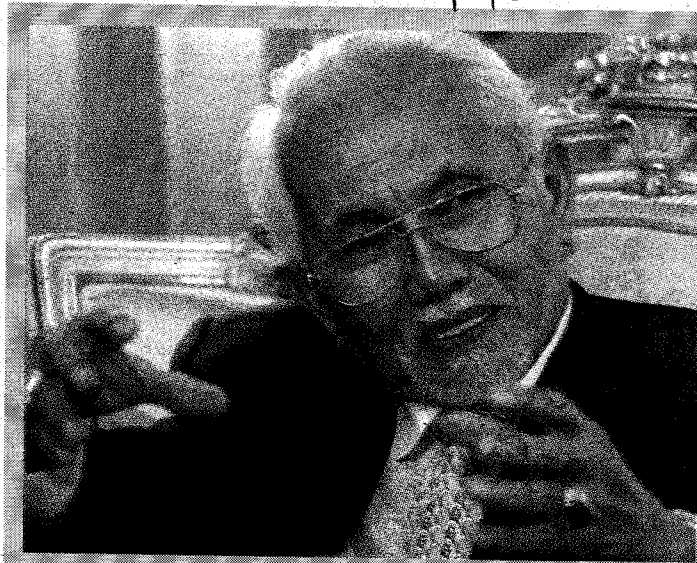
They told me it was unfair to deprive him of the opportunity to serve the people just because he is my brother. I had to give in, but I put my foot down for a similar proposal for my son. He was also not interested in politics.

But those who don't know what actually transpired are saying that I'm grooming my brother as my successor. He doesn't have ambitions to be the chief minister. Neither do I have any plans for him.

Q: What about your family members' involvement in business?

A: Some of my siblings and children are in business. They don't discuss business with me and I don't discuss politics with them. I can't stop them from engaging in business because that would be tantamount to depriving them of their rights.

I have never been involved in any decisions which involve the



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interests of my family members.

There was one case when a close relative tried to push her way through at a government department. The officer got in touch with me. I told him to strictly follow procedures and requirements.

Q: The business community in Sarawak has expressed fears that there might be abrupt changes to government policies when you leave.

A: You know that we just cannot appoint a successor. There must be an ideology, and there must a guardian of that ideology.

The guardian of the ideology is the party. The leaders of the party, the mid-level leaders of the party, must be committed to the ideology. It's a term of ref-

erence for the top leader to interact with the party as a whole so they will all move within the same framework, because the framework has been tested and it works.

In Sarawak, if you try implementing half-cooked development plans, you'll be in trouble. We have over 5,000 villages and longhouses scattered in every nook and corner of the state.

Q: There are those who can't wait for you to step down, while others fear a political upheaval when you leave.

A: I may be a stumbling block to many things, both good and bad. But I carry on by being true to myself.

When I was sick and had an operation last year, the business

community was worried that I might step down abruptly and rock the political stability of Sarawak. Even the younger generation political leaders were all shaken up.

We have capable people, it's just a matter of grooming them.

Q: Are you happy with the elections for supreme council seats in the PBB?

A: People who don't know us think that everything is pre-arranged. Do you seriously think you could arrange for the more than 1,000 delegates to choose whom you want without campaigning?

There wasn't much campaigning and some of those who campaigned lost. People rejected them. This is the PBB way.

I get a bit disappointed when people say there is no democracy in PBB. I don't expect people to understand the intricacies of Sarawak. This is too much to explain. I don't get involved in any clique.

If I don't like anything, I tell people that to their face. If people don't want to understand me, there is nothing I can do.

Q: Misunderstood?

A: I know I'm misunderstood, but I don't pay much attention to these things. Even Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was against me.

How do you think I got along with all five prime ministers?

They know me as being very honest and honourable. I never betrayed anybody, never stabbed people in the back. I fought, yes, but in front.

I'm not saying I'm perfect. I have to work with a strong conviction and follow what I think is right. That's a simple way of life.

Now, people are expecting me to name my successor. I didn't name any successor. Why should I? I have not found one.

Critics think I must go because I'm too strong; I've been (in power) too long. I know. If I have a choice, I want to step down. I'd already planned to walk out

last year. But I had to stay because if I leave without the right people and a strong team in place, everything might just crumble.

Q: What happened?

A: Do you think I can groom someone out of nowhere just like that? I did try — three of them.

(Datuk Seri) Adenan (Satem) was so close, but he couldn't make it. Is it my fault?

I'm staying on because I feel I'm needed to hold things together. I said to myself: "OK, wait a bit longer until things can be preserved properly and somebody is found."

Succession in our kind of political practice cannot be equated to choosing someone — the heir apparent — to the traditional absolute ruler.

Age caught up with them (the three leaders). If you don't see this together with the background and culture of PBB, you might interpret it differently.

If at all I'm kicking people out, things won't be moving in a continuous way in relation to what is happening in the party.

I stick to the practice that has been created. Don't go out of line. You can amend it if it needs amendment but you have to toe the line. Some people can make it, some cannot. When Datuk Seri Mohd Effendi Norwawi gave up, what could I do?

Now Abang Johari (PBB deputy president Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Openg) is the only one left from the three.

Adenan said he wanted to go because of the age factor. If I stay on for another three years, he'll be 66.

How do you groom people at 66? Maybe you can lead the government for five years, but after that, what do you do?

You have to find someone who can lead for at least 10 years. I just build a team. Who comes up (as the leader) doesn't matter to me as long as they are together.

I have to build a team with a leader who can function. We cannot use the American prac-

tice (absolute democracy) here.

Q: You mentioned Singapore's succession model recently.

A: I see (Minister Mentor) Lee Kuan Yew as one of those leaders who are obsessed in making sure Singapore succeeds. The way he does it is by grooming his leaders. He gives opportunities for people to shine, to show their talent, to learn to handle crises.

He has been very persistent about this since the 1970s. Now his son is there, but he still remains. That is Lee Kuan Yew.

But I'm not interested in staying in any position after I leave.

Q: Not even in an advisory capacity?

A: Once I go, and if people want my advice, it becomes an opinion. One thing about politics is that you don't try to force your views on the new leader.

The new man is responsible for his actions so he must have the freedom to choose. He must use his best judgment because if he is not convinced that what he is doing is right, how does he defend it?

If you want to ask for my opinion, telephone me. If you want my advice, I will be happy to give it, like anybody else in the country.

Otherwise, it's wrong. It would be embarrassing for the new leader. If they want my advice, they can always ask. We will be there to assist.

When we retire, we don't stand for election. We don't have the responsibility to the people. We should never interfere. That's my style, the old school style.

Some people ask me what happens if my successor cannot conform to the requirements.

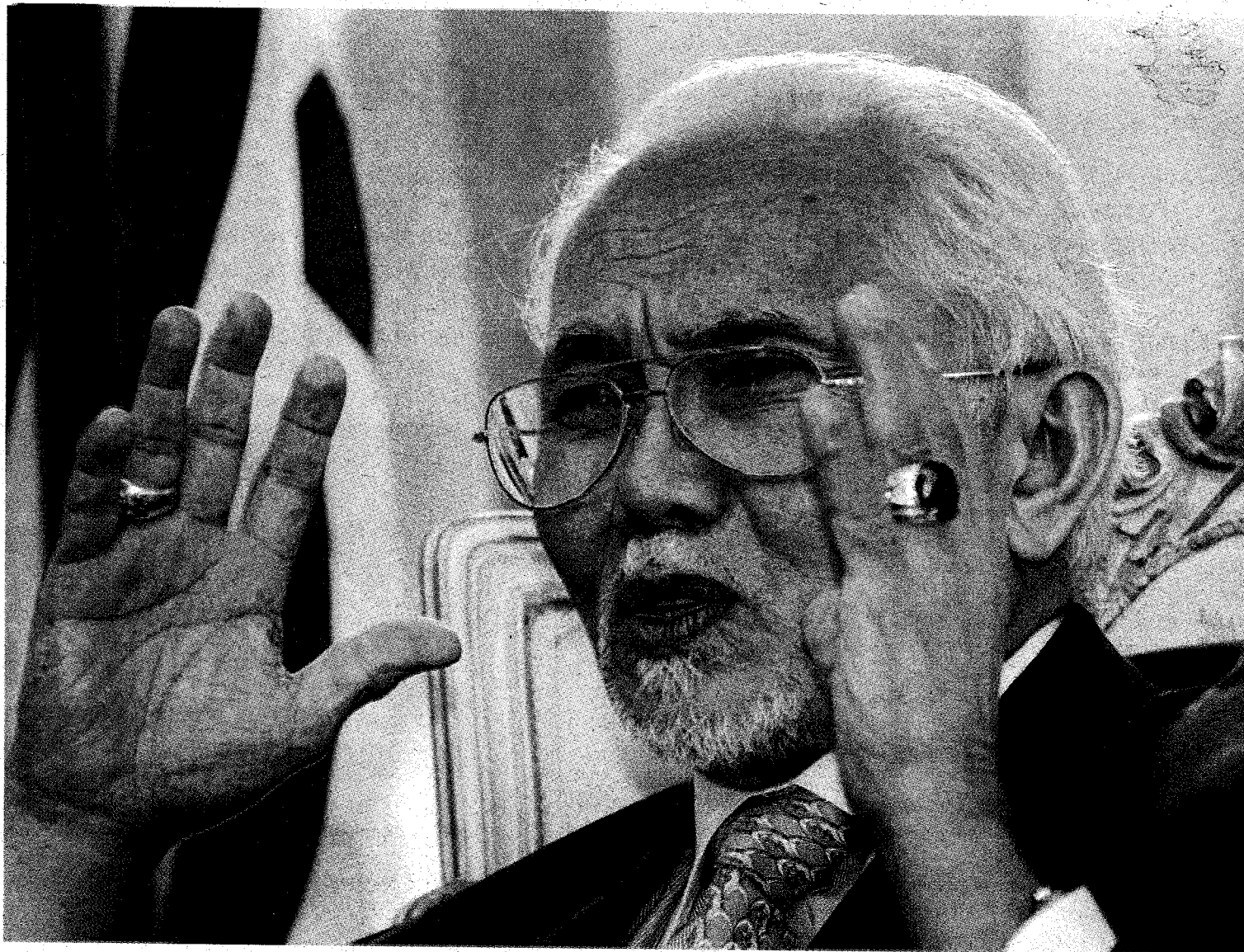
Q: Have you given a time frame for this new process?

A: No, to put a time frame would get people to hurry up, and that would put pressure on them.

They all know I want to step down. They know this well but they are happy that I'm staying to make sure everything will continue to work well after I retire.

Q: How is the Barisan Nasional in Sarawak?

A: It is not easy to solve internal



problems in the component parties. Even now there are some problems but I let them take time to solve their squabbles. If they want my advice, I give my advice. If they want my help, I help them.

When you are in denial, you cannot solve your problems. That is natural, but at some point, you must realise the mistake and seek a solution.

In the late 80s, I was almost toppled but SUPP (Sarawak United People's Party) stood behind me. They threw their support behind me although there were those who tried playing up racial sentiments.

Today, SUPP is in trouble, so I'm standing by to see if they need any

help. But I won't simply interfere in their internal matters.

The BN is still solidly united. We need to give them time, as in politics, you cannot find a lasting solution in a hurried manner.

I just hope they realise the general election may not be too far away. Something must be done.

Q: How do you see BN's defeat in nine state constituencies in the last state election?

A: These are urban voters. It is not a racial thing. Urban voters sometimes come up with issues based on perceptions and not facts.

There was this case in Sibul where the then SUPP president was voted out because of issues

which were later proven to be false.

They accused him of not opposing the 3M education policy which they claimed would wipe out Chinese education system and their culture. They sacrificed a very good leader.

Urban areas can sometimes be volatile because some urban voters have short memories.

In urban areas, we lack the necessary infrastructure for active intellectual exchange.

Q: Would you still be leading BN in the next general election?

A: Yes, I will have to. There is no choice. But for the next state elections, I don't know yet.

Q: Do you see Umno making its way into Sarawak?

A: Eventually. It can't be done in a hurried manner. There are problems because our brand of politics is different from the peninsula.

Some may say that our kind of politics is archaic, but it works well for us.

We have Dayak and Orang Ulu in PBB. Let's say a Dayak joins Umno and attends the Umno general assembly. Sitting there listening to the debate about Islam, about Malays and other issues which are alien to him, he would be asking: "Am I in the right party?"

This is the kind of questions we need to ask. Do the Malays here

feel okay about joining Umno? We have to find out.

Some say we have no feelings for Malaysia. Is it true? You must see how we celebrate Merdeka.

We have strong feelings towards Malaysia. We want to be a useful and vibrant member of the federation.

Q: Do you have fears that the younger generation leaders might not appreciate the tough early journey of the party?

A: If you don't build on it, we will become irrelevant. That's why you must lead the party in such a way that the search for freedom will not make people forget our way of life.

We talk about democracy and we have seen many democracies end up autocratic and even in anarchy. Some end in civil wars.

Freedom cannot be built in isolation. It has to be carefully woven into our way of life so that it could become part of our culture.

It takes time and we have been able to do it without distorting our delicate cultural fabric.

When we speak, we don't just blurt out and shout at people regardless of their feelings.

Our people are very sensitive. We come from various backgrounds, different religions, different races.

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