

Hisham: The keris is here to stay

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DATUK Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein's face is deeply tanned after a short break in Pangkor with the family where he caught "the biggest fish of my life."

When he saw the sceptical faces around him, he did not stretch his arms wide as is the case in most stories about a catch from the sea but held them apart at a realistic chest width.

The weeks leading to the party general assembly had been stressful for the Umno Youth chief.

"It is such an important forum for Umno and my speech before the Youth wing is always my most important in the year," he said.

He had walked into his office in a cornflower blue *baju Melayu* in preparation for Friday prayers later on. As he went past a painting of a pair of *keris*, he joked: "*Baju Melayu* also cannot, is it? Okay, okay, take down this painting (of the *keris*)."

Inside his Education Minister's room, his aides joked that he had better remove a massive *tongkat ali* root - a gift from a supporter - sitting on the side cabinet since it resembled the *keris*.

It has been a week since the assembly but public disquiet over the content and the tone of the debate has yet to dissipate.

The 45-year-old son of a former prime minister has come across as rather "ultra" to some but in person, he is erudite, sophisticated and, hard as it may be for his detractors to believe, rather reasonable.

In the interview with **JOCELINE TAN**, he argued why it was necessary to allow the Umno grassroots to release their fears and uneasiness in the controlled environment of the assembly rather than let it get out of hand elsewhere. He defended the *keris* as a Malay cultural symbol and spoke about the impact of the assembly on race relations and ties with the other Barisan Nasional component parties.

Q. This general assembly saw the Malay Agenda come out stronger than in previous years.

A. Two questions I get everywhere I go - why more so this year, and why I did what I did. Any leader in a complex society like Malaysia has to feel the pulse of the constituency. It's like what one of the delegates said about the duck swimming in calm waters but paddling like mad to stay afloat. It's the same with ensuring stability - it requires a lot of work that is not seen, there's all this furious paddling beneath the water surface.

What happened this year was because issues raised in the past year or so have created resentment, frustration. I could feel the Malays were very restless over issues like the Lina Joy and apostasy case, the IFC (Inter-Faith Commission), the status of Islam.

SMSes going back and forth about Christian conversions and the Azhar Mansor thing. Geo-politically, there are the issues of Palestine, Iran, Israel. Then there were vocal criticisms from Asli (Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute) and Lee Kuan Yew.

There is also the process of more transparency and freedom of the press. All these played on the Malay psyche. If they had not been allowed to release their feelings in a controlled channel, it could have been even worse. We are in control of the situation.

If you look at what happened, there was the opening speech, then the delegates spoke, then I pulled them back on track with my closing speech. It's not about starting a fire and letting it go out of control. I told them Umno Youth has never been as strong as today and that it has to be translated

into strength in the Barisan.

Of course, a few of them got out of control like Shamsul (Najmi), who asked Zam (Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin) to resign. I was so upset but when I met him the next day, I told him to apologise and Zam had accepted it.

Q. The target seemed to be non-Malays rather than Umno's political opposition.

A. If you read my speech in detail, you will realise the targets are those who were wrong in their assumptions and arguments such as Asli and Lee Kuan Yew. People tend to look at things from what one, two, three delegates said. You have to also look at the leadership.

I am the leader of Umno Youth. Do I look like somebody out to target the non-Malays? And would I do that intentionally? For what purpose? Pemuda Umno (Umno Youth) is at its strongest. I don't need that kind of record. We have built up Pemuda to the extent that it is respected. My relationship with the BN Youth is so good. Why would I want to jeopardise it?

Q. But do you have to keep bran-

dishing the keris?

A. What is it about the *keris* that makes people so uncomfortable? The *keris* is on the Umno flag. There are two *keris* on the Umno logo. It is the symbol of Malay culture. It's not Umno. It's not Pemuda. You give *keris* as gifts to non-Malays and non-Malays give them to me at functions. (Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh) Tsu Koon showed me a huge *keris* during our Penang convention.

Q. Will you carry it again next year?

A. Yes, I will carry it again next year. The *keris* is here to stay. I told Liow (MCA Youth chief Datuk Liow Tiong Lai), give me your *kungfu* sword and I will carry it. I am doing it on a question of principle, until people realise the *keris* is not there to threaten non-Malays but to motivate the Malays. These are all symbols to get Malays to move.

We will do whatever it takes to bring them to a point where they don't feel they are alienated in their own country. We've tried everything and if it can help Malays be more focused on what they can do, then my conscience is clear. I did it for the future. I want

non-Malays to understand that our doing this is not to take anything away from anybody. That is also enshrined. Allowing the release will help the stability of the country. It won't drive off investments.

Q. Is the keris not also symbolic of Malay supremacy?

A. Far from it. Unless I keep going on, every day, every year, people will not get out of thinking about the *keris* this way. If I can't do it, I don't think anybody else can.

If I can't do it when I'm leading Umno Youth, with Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) as the PM and Najib (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) as the DPM, when our economy is going strong, and we are rolling out the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP), then when? Wait till our rubber and palm oil prices go down before voicing our fears about apostasy and the IFC? By then people will be hungry; they don't want to talk anymore.

Q. MCA and Gerakan may lose votes at the expense of Umno releasing tension.

A. We have to get our priorities

right. It's not just about winning elections but building a society and a very complex one that requires strong leadership. We are in it together. Even if Umno wins a lot of seats and the component parties do not win, it is not going to make us happy. We have to deliver as we build up to the elections.

Q. What does all this say about race relations after almost 50 years as a nation?

A. If you were talking to me when I was (Youth and Sports Minister), I'd say we could do it in our lifetime. But now I am more realistic because you get pulled in so many directions. You have to look at things from so many angles. It is very difficult being in a society that is very complex, but there is strength in diversity. If we galvanise that, we have something to offer the world.

Q. There was so much about Malay issues and too little on meritocracy, competitiveness or the push against corruption.

A. It's all relative. If Dr Mahathir (former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) had been there, you probably won't be talking about the *keris*, or the New Economic Policy. But people expect too much of a three-day gathering. How much more (do) you want to say about fighting corruption? Pak Lah is moving in that direction.

As for meritocracy, Johor Umno has said that we are worried about Malays in the rural areas who cannot get the same level of opportunities in education.

Reducing the gap between rural and urban areas is the right way. As for teaching Mathematics and Science in English, we cannot decide till 2008 even though the Malays and the Chinese don't want it.

On competitiveness, we are telling them: "Buck up, we've got only 14 years (till 2020). Don't worry about your rights and religion. For now we have to implement the 9MP." Lecturing them to work harder, telling them they are lazy and corrupt, those days are over. Pak Lah's approach is different and we have to go with the new leadership.

Q. What did this assembly mean for you personally?

A. This is my eighth assembly. The early part was trying to rebuild the wing (after the sacking of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim). Morale was so low, some didn't even want to wear the Pemuda uniform. After eight years of hard work, we have the strength to move on. In my speech, I told them not to look back but to move forward.

Q. Your deputy Khairy Jamaluddin had a controversial run-up to the assembly. How do you think he fared?

A. He did very well. I told him, now that people outside have heard the real grassroots speak in Umno, they are probably thinking that Khairy is not so bad. Yes, he is Oxford material and people expect more of him. But he's back in Malaysian society and he has to address the concerns of the constituents. An Oxford degree is not going to help if your country is in shambles.

But he will need to prove himself, and if he learns, he'll get wiser. Sometimes people come back and feel they want to change things. Then you realise it is not so simple and you really sit down and learn. He has learnt a lot but he's still got a lot more to learn. He's so lucky he has Pak Lah as his father-in-law.