

POLITICS AND MEDIA: NOT STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

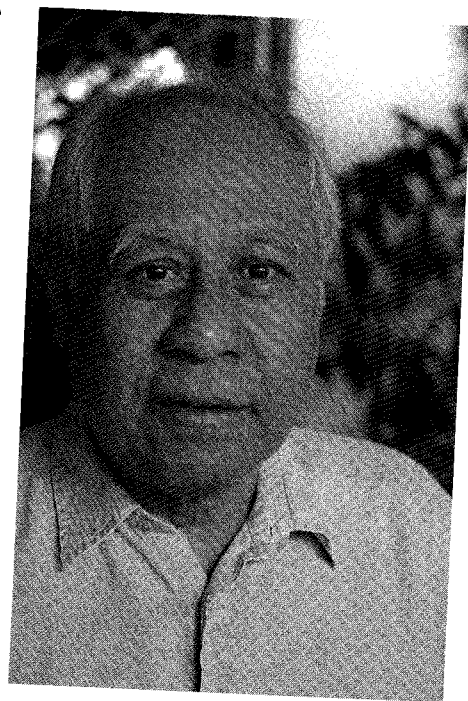
Ex-politician and journalist Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad shares his thoughts on politics and media in Malaysia.

Leaders, no matter how smart and effective, can have short shelf lives in politics as well as in media, particularly in the Malaysian fishbowl if they are perceived as too independent or a threat.

History bears this out. Tunku Abdul Rahman led the UMNO ruling coalition to victory in 51 out of 52 seats (losing only in Parit Buntar to PAS in what would unfold into a repetitive pattern in Malay politics) in his first general election in July 1955. Fourteen years later, the Father of the Nation was hounded out of office by the same people who made him president of UMNO in 1951. "In politics, a week is a long time. If you aspire to be politicians, please remember that always," muses Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, ex-politician, ex-journalist, ex-diplomat and current chairman of the Institute of Political and Economic Analysis (IKAPE), a private-funded non-profit think-tank since May 2006, during a "political tutorial" at a

pondok somewhere in Ampang sometime in May 2006.

He should know. The bright young journalist, discovered in his early twenties when elevated to the position of the first-ever political secretary to the government in 1963, working for Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak who later became Malaysia's second PM, was branded a communist and detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for five years during the premiership of the third PM, Dato' Hussein Onn. He was then retrieved from ISA by the fourth PM, Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and enjoyed notoriety as a supposed crony of DPM Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Then in 2003, the incumbent fifth PM Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi sacked him as the Group Editor-in-Chief of the UMNO-aligned New Straits Times Press for writing an article that ruffled the feathers of Saudi Arabia, who caused him to be removed using the threat (didn't occur) that Malaysia's hajj



Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad

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quota would be slashed – a good practical case study where religion intruded into politics, where religion is used as a bargaining chip. However, Abdullah said at that time that the article criticising the Saudi monarchy was merely the straw that broke the camel's back. He had already been upsetting the

establishment with his caustic twice-weekly columns and frequent editorials (which at times were not run of the mill opinion) on UMNO and the government, and were taboo in an established newspaper.

He might not have access to national media channels anymore, but Abdullah still





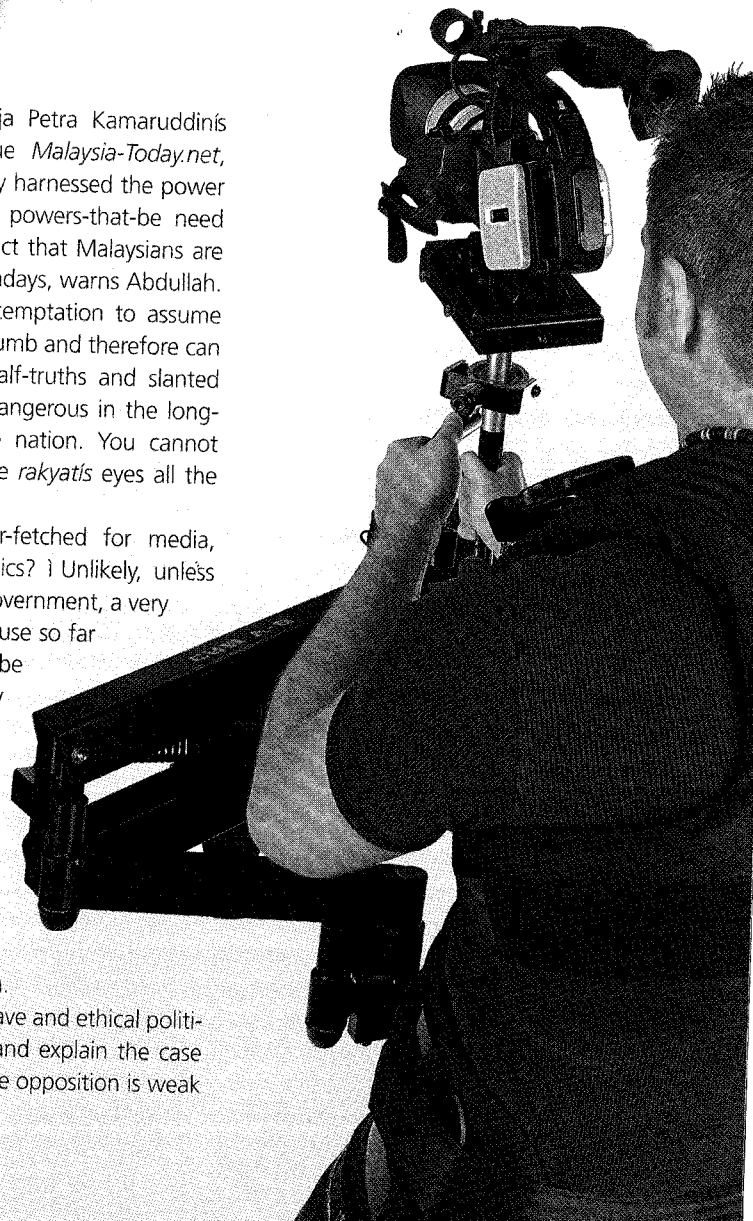
holds strong views on politics and media. Outspoken as ever, he wants reform in both sectors. Realistic as ever, he holds scant optimism given the status quo. 'They are two seemingly unlinked institutions, but the media and politics in Malaysia think alike and draw a common depressing conclusion,' says Abdullah wryly.

Like politicians, those working in media have to obediently toe the party or government line, as Abdullah himself learnt to his cost. However, the real reason he was sacked unceremoniously was his strong support for Dato' Seri Najib (his mentor's eldest son) against the preferred candidate for the Deputy Prime Minister's post Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. 'I was warned about this but I persisted. This shows that freedom of the media, like everything else is relative. Our journalists are by and large embedded, and embedded reports, articles, commentaries and even editorials tend to offer conclusions that reflect their Master's voice, either that of the owners of newspapers or TV stations or the political boss. That's an undisputed fact. Anyone who has the guts to write what he really thinks will be fired, demoted, sidelined and made an outcast or worse.'

Fortunately, Malaysians now have alternative sources of information, thanks to disenchanted bloggers and independent sites like

Malysiakini and Raja Petra Kamaruddin's seemingly gospel-true *Malaysia-Today.net*, which have effectively harnessed the power of the Internet. The powers-that-be need to wake up to the fact that Malaysians are better-informed nowadays, warns Abdullah. 'There may be the temptation to assume that Malaysians are dumb and therefore can be nourished with half-truths and slanted news. I submit it is dangerous in the long-term interests of the nation. You cannot pull the wool over the *rakyat's* eyes all the time.'

If reform looks far-fetched for media, is it possible for politics? 'Unlikely, unless there is a change of government, a very distant possibility because so far life has continued to be too good for too many people including the foreign guest workers; there has never been in recent political history yet a general consensus among all Malaysians that their standard of living has suffered much. And we do not have brave and ethical politicians ready to leap in and explain the case for genuine reforms. The opposition is weak and divided.'



Neither does he think much of the reformation movement's figurehead, Anwar Ibrahim. "It is both sad and strange that the demand for *reformasi* comes from him only after he had been dismissed from the government. More distressingly, there were no calls for reformation though he was deputy PM for many years. Still, let us see whether Malaysians will support him in his pursuit to regain power. They may want to give him a second chance," adds Abdullah.

Anwar Ibrahim's theocratic, Islamist roots might make him popular with Malays but are not exactly salubrious for a multi-racial country desperately trying to forge unity. Abdullah is adamant that theocracy

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— whether Islamic, Christian or Jewish — is dangerous, and holds that religion must not unduly intrude into politics for national stability. "The new Christian theocrats and the neo-conservative politicians in the biblical literalism and bigotry are no different from their Muslim counterparts. They are Taliban fellow travellers. Most of their energy, the Christian theocrats and Muslim theologians — is spent on preventing further advance of liberalism, secularism and enlightenment. In America, constitutional safeguards against theocracy are strong. On the other hand, in almost all Muslim nations, theocracy is promoted and celebrated," he notes.

The rising tide of theocracy has influenced Malaysian politics — and polarised communities. "The non-Malays have been quite anxious since the late seventies because Malaysia has become more Islamic politically. Though what you see may not be in the interest of the body politic now or in the future, it hasn't stopped the Islamic progression. It should be quite obvious because UMNO is always under pressure to seem as Islamic as PAS, sometimes greater to prevent itself from being outsmarted and outflanked. This trend began in the late seventies and Malaysia has since become more Islamic politically," says Abdullah.

Thus far, adopting the guise and mannerisms of Islam — if not the substance! — seems to have become a central party strategy for UMNO and its politicians.

"Though UMNO remains a centrist party, it has to tread along a very delicate path. For now, the Malays have turned away from the religious party except in Kelantan and the price has been pretty expensive, otherwise more of Malaysia would have gone to the Islamists. Do not underrate PAS. If the economy falters, our Malay position appears under threat. The Islamists should do well in the Malay heartland: Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu — all Malay pockets throughout the country."

He understands why disenfranchised Malays have embraced Islamism. "The Malays think this nation is fast becoming clearly beyond their reach so they push Malayness further in order to create a Muslim-Malay identity, in other words an Islamic entity. To Malays in the Malay heartland, an Islamic theocratic state is not wishful thinking. The number of Malays with this mindset is growing, not diminishing. If the silent majority remains passive and indifferent, they only have themselves to blame when that state becomes a reality."

"Middle Malaysia can only check its fast-track advance towards an Islamic theocratic state if they work together, seek and build coalitions with various enlightened groups," advises Abdullah.

So far, Middle Malaysia is steering a middle path, says Abdullah, admitting that PM No. 5 has been able to maintain racial harmony, inclusive Islam and an acceptable level of prosperity. But to sustain and elevate

the status quo, there has to be more effort made to create and share wealth, while improving individual and social liberties. Abdullah stated unequivocally, "The Ninth Malaysia Plan must benefit all races; no one should ever lag behind. The inequality between *kampung* and town must be narrowed; the suffocating income gap between races and within each community should be quickly approximated. We have done well through power-sharing. Still, the feeling persists among the Bumiputeras that they have been shortchanged by the private sector and the non-Bumiputeras feel discriminated against by the government. This disquiet and the feeling of alienation have to stop sooner rather than later. We are a rich country, we shall succeed; the economy is expanding for all to share equally and fairly. But what use is a full stomach if we lack self-worth, individual freedom and a civil society in which intellectual activism and scholarship can flourish?"

Abdullah was in his element, rather sleek for a man just past his 69 years. (He spoke with no trace of bitterness unless, of course, he is a good actor which some people say he is. A hint of disenchantment here and there. Yes.) The intriguing question is, 'What's his next move?' He appears as busy as ever: giving speeches, reading, writing and editing, partying and travelling. An observer says, "Abdullah is a very good behind-the-scenes operator. Though no longer an insider, he seems surprisingly quite well-informed and very determined."

As we left the "tutorial", we could not help feeling that — all being well — there might be a third time around for this proactive "old political horse." ■

