

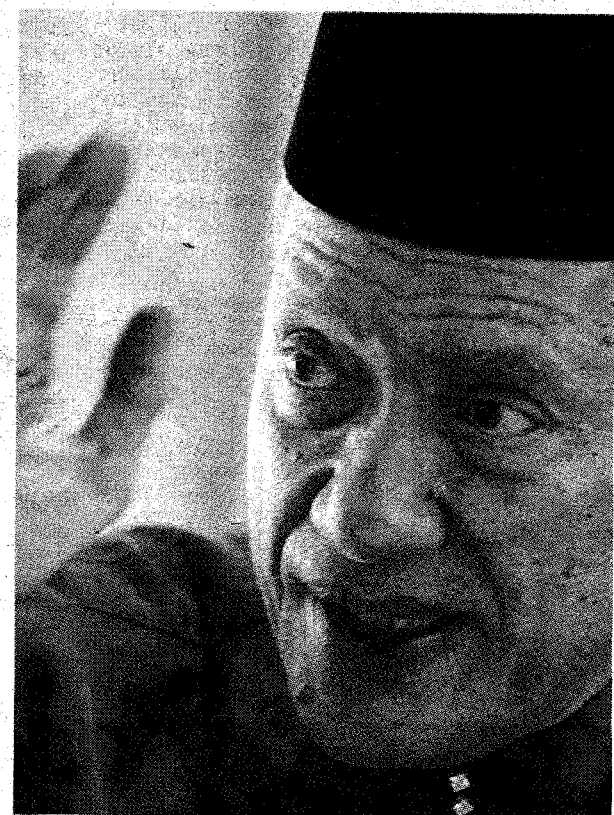
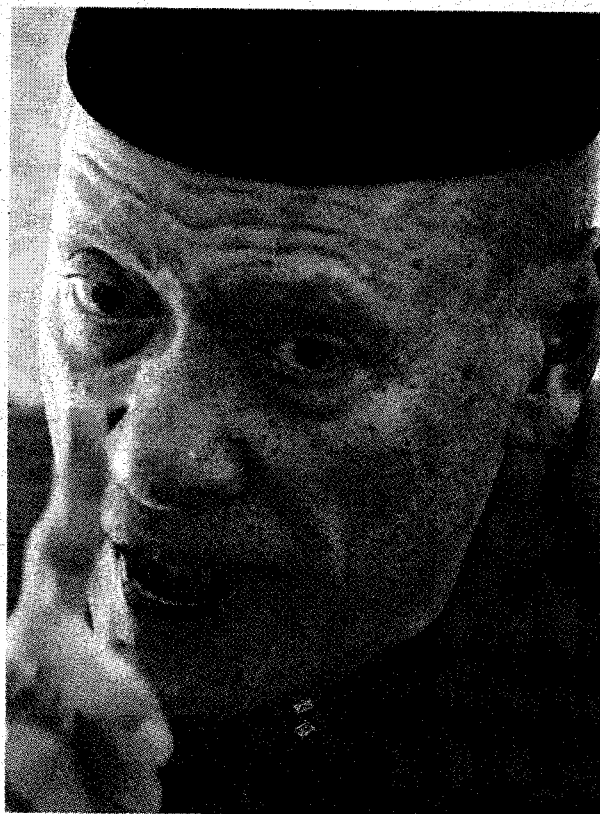
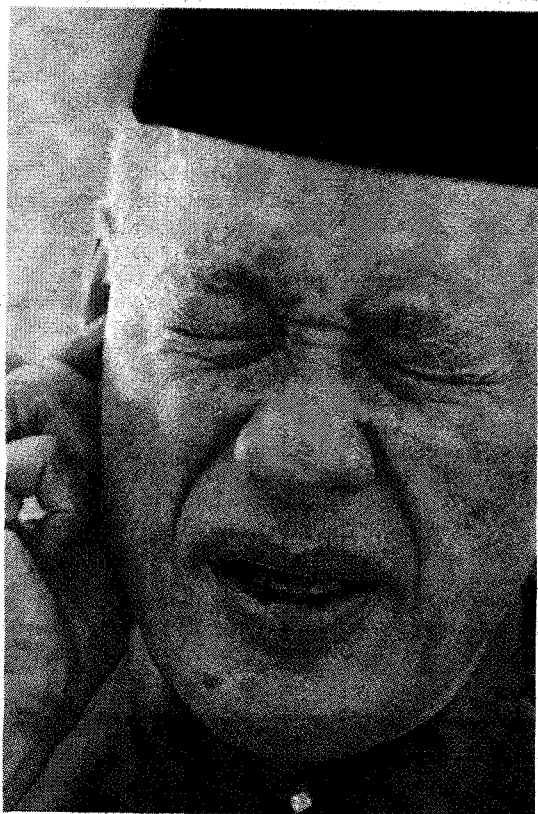
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'Many factors led to debacle'

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Barisan Nasional has come under intense fire from all and sundry for its underperformance in the general election, and there have even been calls for Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi to take the blame and step down. ANNIE FREEDA CRUEZ talks to Umno stalwart Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib on what contributed to the ruling party's poor performance



Q: As Umno information chief, what do you think are the reasons for what happened?

A: So many factors actually. When BN won resoundingly in 2004, they said it was because of the "Pak Lah factor". Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was unhappy and said it was too big a majority and that we must have a strong opposition.

Dr Mahathir's continuous attack on Pak Lah on various issues, including the economy, caught on with the non-Malays.

When Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim came and offered a very inviting alternative to the Chinese like "You can take Penang" and "No need for the National Economic Policy" they were tempted.

Another cause of BN's downfall was the demolition of a Hindu temple in Shah Alam a week before Deepavali which led to the formation of Hindraf.

The Indians became very angry. Anwar took this opportunity again to say that the government was too arrogant, proud and anti-religion, while Pas in Kelantan never does such things.

The direct telecast of the Um-

no general assembly, especially the kris-waving issue, was another factor which frightened the non-Malays. The non-Malays felt Umno was becoming more extremist in nature, chauvinistic, powerful.

The broom issue (where former Selangor menteri besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo chastised non-performing civil servants) was another factor which angered a lot of civil servants not only in Selangor but nationwide.

The escalating price of consumer products, crime and the active blogs contributed to BN's poor performance. The government did not take the blogs seriously.

Q: Do you think the selection of candidates also led to the poor performance?

A: Yes. The selection of candidates was another big issue. Some of the candidates were from other states and of course the locals were unhappy.

There were some good candidates but they were not nominated by the BN component divisions. Those within divisions were also not happy with the candidates nominated by their division heads.

Muhammad gets cracking

Q: Congratulations on your appointment as rural and regional development minister. What does this appointment mean to you?

A: I was (Selangor) menteri besar for 11 years (1986-1997) and for 11 years I rested. I have been loyal to Umno and BN and I will continue to do so irrespective of the leader.

Let me thank the prime minister for giving me this post and I promise to carry out my duty to the best of my ability.

I have been given the responsibility of ensuring rural folk are not left out in national development.

My first task would be to go nationwide to rural areas to check if the people are enjoying basic amenities, such as clean water, electricity and good roads.

It's also my responsibility to let people in rural areas know what the government plans to do to uplift their standard of living and whether the planned development projects have been implemented.

I must also work towards ensuring that there is no more hardcore poverty by 2010.

It's a mammoth task entrusted to me and I shall make sure that the government's vision and mission for the rural folk is achieved.

The people have also to be trained to earn a decent income through activities such as fish farming, rearing of chicken and livestock, and being involved in cottage industries and agriculture.

Q: The Tourism Ministry, for example, is no longer channelling funds for tourism projects directly to the Pakatan Rakyat-held states but through the state tourism councils. Will your ministry be doing the same for rural development programmes?

A: We need to have our own outfit. The Pakatan Rakyat-led governments will have their own programmes. We want to be free with our programmes and not be obstructed by them.

At the end of the day, we want the people to benefit from our programmes and activities.

Q: What is the most pressing

need of rural folk and what can the ministry do to provide them with it?

A: I think the most pressing problem will be ensuring that their basic needs are met such as clean water, electricity and roads. They must have easy access to health-care and education for their children.

I know some remote areas in Sabah and Sarawak which still do not have clean water supply and electricity.

Q: The Pakatan Rakyat-held states are selling their brand of economic programmes, which they claim are fairer than that of BN.

A: We have done our part. Selangor, for example, has achieved developed status 15 years ahead of the rest of the country.

This is through the hard work of BN.

We have done all the necessary work in terms of economic, rural, health, education and recreational developments.