

Najib understands problems better

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FORMER Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has a reputation of being a feisty statesman. Today got the rare chance to meet him at his office in Putrajaya — the city that he personally designed — yesterday. He was all smiles and subtlety as he talked about the general election and his nation's political future, but his views are razor-sharp as ever, as Nazry Bahrawi (nazry@mediacorp.com.sg) found out.

On THE RULING COALITION

The Barisan Nasional has just released its report card. What are your opinions on its achievements since 2004, when Mr Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first term as Prime Minister began?

DR M: There are of course a lot of negative things that are not in the report card. For example, lots of money is being lost, the prestige of the nation has gone down and the fact is a lot of people cannot find work or business in the country. They have to go elsewhere.

Which achievements would you take issue with?

Islam Hadhari has caused a lot of confusion. There is only one Islam and now they are told that they are followers of Islam Hadhari or modern Islam as if it is a new religion. With regards to the new development corridors, they are just announcements. Nothing has happened on the ground. The amount of money involved is fantastic. It goes into trillions of ringgit and it will happen over a period of maybe 10 to 20 years. So, these are promises. Anybody can make a promise.

What do you think of the Barisan Nasional (BN) election strategy?

I think it is a good strategy and they will gain a lot of support from the people.

On SUCCESSION IN UMNO

How do you see leadership succession panning out in Umno (the United Malays National Organisation) and Malaysia as a whole?

We have certain traditions. Unfortunately, some traditions have partly been broken. For example, no one is allowed to contest leadership position. The Prime Minister determines who the leader will be and any challenge towards the leadership is not permitted. However, some people are actually called up and told not to stand. This is not Umno tradition at all.

In an earlier interview, you suggested that Mr Abdullah should make way for Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. Why did you say that?

I said that I thought he should be PM for one term and that he should be succeeded by Datuk Seri Najib because Datuk Seri Najib is senior to him. From the speeches that he

(Najib) makes, he understands problems much better. He does not seem to be concerned about making sure that any support for the previous government was wrong.

But you had personally chosen Mr Abdullah over Mr Najib ...

Well, at that time, he (Abdullah) was a good choice because he was known as Mr Clean. And he was also older. So, I thought he should get a chance to become Prime Minister at least for one term.

What do you think of the possibility of Mr Hishamuddin Hussein or Mr Khairy Jamaluddin playing a bigger role in Umno after the elections?

I think if you follow them, it will be disastrous for the party.

On THE OPPOSITION

What do you think of the opposition, including former DPM Anwar Ibrahim?

The opposition, as usual, has no very strong platform and they cannot work together. So, Anwar Ibrahim is no longer the great hero that he was thought to be ... Even if he were to win a by-election, he would just be a Member of Parliament and nothing more than that.

Do you believe he has successfully united the opposition?

He has not played a bridging role between the DAP (Democratic Action Party) and PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia). It is not easy to get DAP and PAS together — they have very different philosophies.

What is your prediction of the outcome of this general election?

I think the National Front will still win but maybe with a reduced majority ... I'm quite sure the unrest on the streets since last November will have some impact on the number of votes cast for the government. There will be a reduced number of votes.

The opposition believes it can deny the government a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Do you think this will happen?

I am not so sure they can deny the BN that. Of course, anything can happen in an election. My guess is that the BN will still get two-thirds of the majority — but not the kind of majority it had in 2004.

Why can't the opposition achieve its target?

In Malaysia, the voting is party-based. If you belong to the party, you vote for the party. So although there is dissatisfaction among the members of the ruling party, they will still vote for them. A majority of them vote based on membership of the party or support of the party.

What are the opposition's strengths and weaknesses?

Their strength is that they have drawn attention to the performance of the government in many areas. There were many cases of corruption in the government. The crime rate has also increased. There were a lot of other negative things.

But on the other hand, the opposition does not seem to be able to work together. The parties are always fighting each other. So, their supporters will be very unwilling to support other opposition parties.

Your son Mukhriz Mahathir is contesting the Jerlun seat in Kedah, but he had earlier wanted to contest in Langkawi. Some say this is a movement to sideline him. Do you agree?

I don't know. Some people say such a thing is happening. But I have no evidence.

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