

Issues close to the heart

The Star - 3/2/2008

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi speaks frankly to *The Star's* Group Chief Editor Datuk Wong Chun Wai on a range of topics that are in the news.

In an interview at the Prime Minister's office last week, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi spent more than an hour tackling a host of questions ranging from the expected tough fight from the opposition against the Barisan, particularly the MCA and Gerakan, in the urban seats and the anti-establishment pattern among these voters.

In an unusually frank interview, Abdullah spent over an hour and 40 minutes at the Chinese Room of his office sharing his thoughts on how the Government intended to fight crime and the increasing cost of living - two major issues affecting Malaysian voters.

The Barisan Nasional chairman also spoke about how the lives of Malaysians had been made easier because of the huge subsidy given but many are unaware and have seemingly taken it for granted.

As his bodyguards hinted their impatience because the interview had delayed his departure to Kota Kinabalu, the Penang leader looked at his watch and asked his press secretary Teoh Ai Hua, another Penangite, in Hokkien "kooi tiam leow" (what time is it?), apologising for the abrupt end to the interview and suggested it should continue at another time at Seri Perdana, his official residence.

"We shall continue at my house. Please be on standby, there is plenty of work to do and I want to talk about what the government is doing," he said.

Elections and the economy

Wong: The election fever has started with all political parties busy making preparations. Many are expecting you to dissolve Parliament after the Chinese New Year with polling in March. Is this a fair assessment?

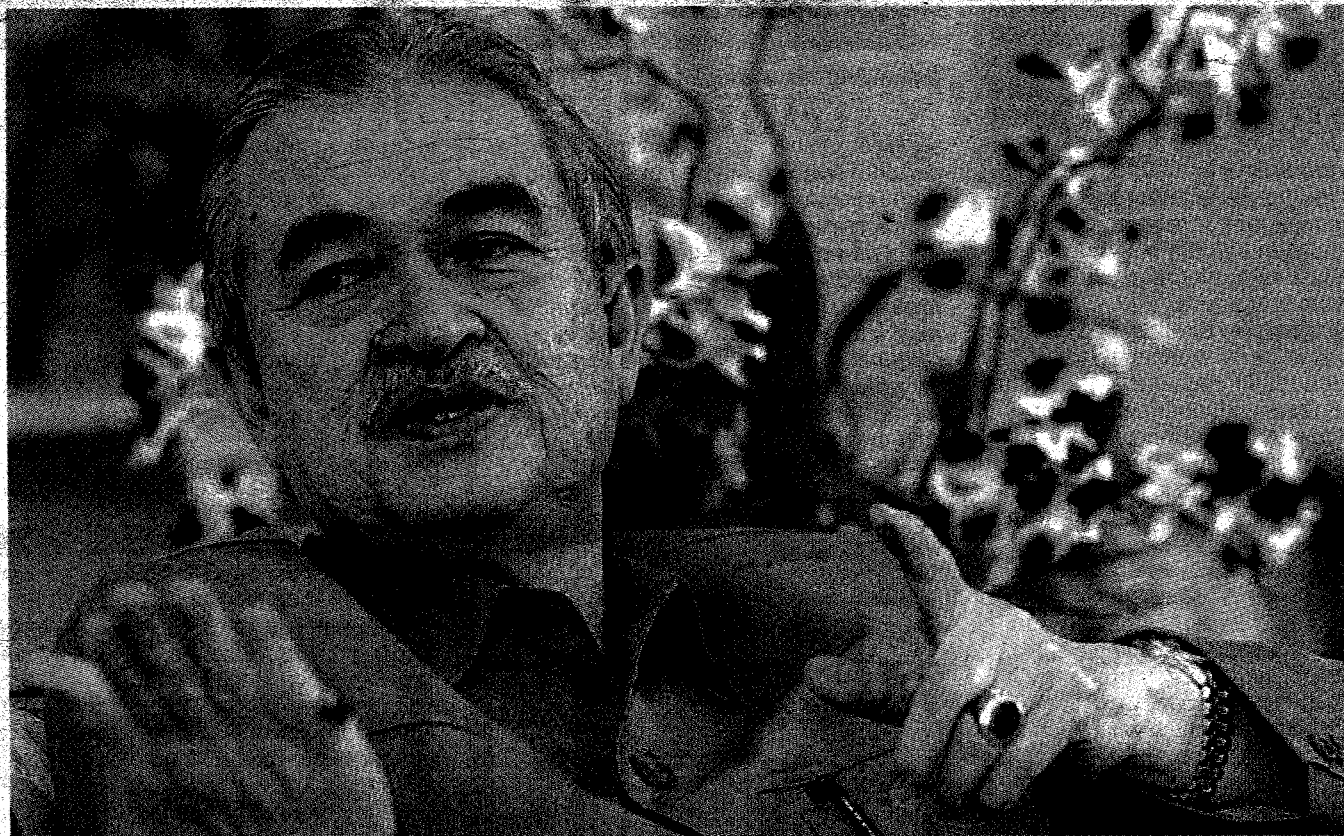
Abdullah: It will be this year. (laughter)

Wong: In the urban areas, Barisan Nasional politicians say they are expecting a tough fight from the Opposition. How are you going to handle this?

Abdullah: In a way, I would say yes because there have been grouses on all sorts of issues from the public ranging from the escalating price of oil, prices of goods, transport and others. We cannot dispute that this situation has primarily been caused by the rise in oil prices but then again, the public needs to be educated about this. They must understand that it is not the government's doing to increase oil prices but rather a cause and effect from the global economy.

In addition, when compared to other countries our oil prices are relatively low, especially since we provide fuel subsidies to the public. And we must also remember that the portion subsidised by the government is more than what the public is paying.

But coming back again to the point, I expect all parties to work hard and fight for every vote. We have to convince voters why we are worthy and Barisan Nasional has the track record to show the



»Efforts to reduce corruption is a long-term battle and we are well aware that it will not disappear in the wink of an eye«

DATUK SERI ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI

voters. We don't just depend on rhetoric, press statements and ceramah to win votes. We don't make unrealistic promises either.

Wong: The government has been providing subsidy from petrol to cooking oil. Have Malaysians become so used to such subsidies, which have reduced the cost of living, that many do not accept that the rising costs are due to the global trends?

Abdullah: I believe so. It has become a *kebiasaan* (normality) to them. I must say that the situation has been managed properly and the people must understand that what we are experiencing is a global phenomenon and not just an issue that affects Malaysia.

We now spend about RM40bil on subsidies, which is not a sustainable situation. Each country has its own problem. Take for example food prices in the United States that have gone up because they use corn to be converted into

ethanol. Simple economics will tell us that when a shortage is created, regardless of the product, there will be an increase in price. I suppose it is convenient to blame the government, but people should really look at it as a global issue.

Wong: Many urban voters are said to be unhappy with the Barisan. To be more precise, the non-Malays talk about punishing Umno leaders for certain statements made that have angered them.

Abdullah: Every party has its share of this kind of people - those who have made statements without first thinking about the consequences of their words. I feel it is unfair to judge Umno based on what a few people say, since the party has more than two million members and more than 100 MPs.

Our policy responses have been measured even though some of these people have made these kinds of statements. Ultimately, I would not condone any sentiments which are hurtful or insulting, especially to other races. It is their responsibility to not *terlanjur kata* (go overboard with words) and they should be also accountable for their actions.

If you remember, during my winding-up speech in 2006 (at the Umno General Assembly), I said Umno must be supported and respected by all races. But support and respect must be earned. And the delegates clapped. They supported my statement.

People should remember that Umno is committed to power sharing. Even in areas where non-Malays are a minority, Umno is prepared to make way for our MCA or MIC friends; they are our loyal partners. Umno will fight against PAS or

PKR in favour of MCA or MIC candidates.

In Ijok, we stood firm in appointing an MIC candidate and vigorously campaigned for him, even though the opposition selected a Malay candidate. (Deputy Prime Minister) Najib campaigned hard for him. Even I went to visit Ijok once. Other Umno leaders went too. And he was elected with an increased majority. We did not succumb to the politics of race.

A place for all Malaysians?

Wong: There has been a sense of disquiet among some non-Malays and even Muslims about their place in the country. What is your assurance that there is a place for all Malaysians?

Abdullah: There is definitely a place for all Malaysians. More evident than before, we have corrected the social imbalance by providing better infrastructure, basic needs and quality of life.

In both rural and urban areas, necessary steps have been taken to ensure there is steady growth regardless of race or religion. There is always the thought that we are not doing enough, especially for the non-Malays.

Take the Klang Valley for example, an area which is predominantly inhabited by the Chinese. Look at the amount of development that has taken place. Or Penang, which is also predominantly Chinese.

We have now launched four development corridors around the country, with another one to come in Sarawak soon. All of these developments are for all, not just for the Malays as some cynics would

> TURN TO PAGE 28

Making sure no one is left behind

> FROM PAGE 27

claim. We have embarked on this plan to reduce disparities not just among ethnic groups, but between geographical areas and between urban and rural areas. These new developments will make the respective areas attractive to work and stay in and will help reduce the influx of people who would otherwise throng into the city, causing more slums and squatter areas to spring up.

Our promise was to develop the nation as a whole, and taking into consideration the need of every Malaysian and making sure that no one would be left behind or left out. This is what we are doing with the development corridors; in a nutshell, this is an effort and development for equitable distribution of quality opportunities.

This would invariably also create new sources of income for the rakyat. From time to time, there will be issues or episodes which will upset and make us question our place under the Malaysian sun. When that happens, we all have to try and seek a resolution to the problem.

Wong: I'm sure you're aware that of late some urban middle class parents have been telling their children to stay back overseas after they finish their education because they have no future in Malaysia.

Abdullah: I am very disappointed if some parents think in such a manner. It is as if they are instilling in their children that their country provides them with no benefits or anything good to offer. It is just not right. The children ought to remember that their own parents have earned credible incomes to afford to send them abroad to further their education.

I am not against the notion of furthering one's profession overseas but to portray such an image to their children is not right. Our country has so much to offer and we are growing both economically and socially. There should be no reason to say that Malaysia possesses no professional opportunities.

Corruption and crime

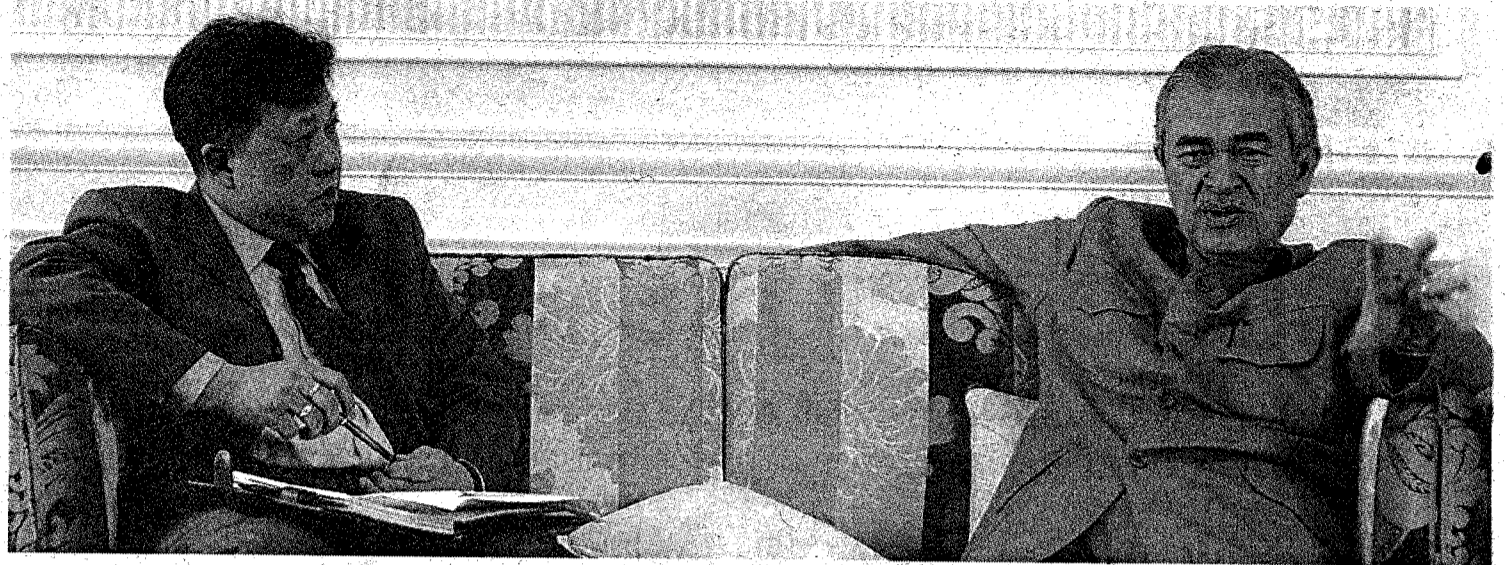
Wong: Since being elected in 2004, you have declared war on corruption and promised to eradicate it. However, there is word that despite all the strong talk, the administration's record in the fight against corruption has been patchy. The people are expecting for more to be done.

Abdullah: What I announced when I took over the leadership was not based on a five-year manifesto. It is a plan that spans across three development periods until 2020. Efforts to reduce corruption is a long-term battle and we are all well aware that it will not disappear in the wink of an eye. There have, however, been various significant improvements. For example, the awareness to eradicate corruption is higher than in previous years and what's more, we now see a trend of people coming forward to report such cases to us rather than just keeping quiet about it. There are even people who are willing to report attempts to corrupt officials.

The public plays an integral part in the fight against corruption simply because they possess the power to stop it. The Anti-Corruption Agency has also been pivotal in addressing this issue. They have been given more manpower and better tools to do their job, such as forensic accounting capabilities. The ACA has increased its own investigation teams.

The number of corruption-related arrests has increased by over 70% from 2001 to 2006; the conviction rate for corruption-related cases has increased from 50% in 2004 to about 75% in 2006 and there has been a 25% increase in the number of corruption reports made by the public in the last four years. The ACA acted quickly after the Auditor General uncovered improper behaviour in his report. In fact, the openness of the government to deal with these issues and the speed with which action was taken is proof that we are determined and committed to fighting these abuses.

But despite all this, we still see that the public is sceptical. In their mind, they must



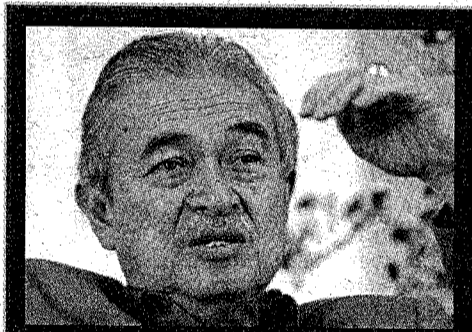
Speaking his mind: Abdullah and Wong during the no-holds-barred interview at the PM's office last week.

see blood even if there is no blood. Even if a person is said or perceived to be corrupt, it does not mean he or she is definitely guilty of such accusations.

Therefore, this is what I mean when I say the public wants to see blood. Such judgments are unfair and sometimes the media must lend a helping hand by not blowing such cases out of proportion and pronouncing people guilty before the courts do. The point is that fighting graft is not about making headlines or expecting quick results, but rather having the stamina for a long-drawn fight.

Wong: Crime is on everyone's mind and plenty of complaints have come streaming in. They say that the streets are not safe anymore.

Abdullah: Let me first say that we hear Malaysians loud and clear on this. Fighting



»I think attacks on Hisham(muddin) as being anti-Chinese is unfair, especially since he has done a lot for Chinese schools. He has been a fair politician«

DATUK SERI ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI

crime, however, is everyone's concern and not just the police. I must say that the increase that has been reported on the nation's crime index since 2006 is due to five more categories of crimes added to the index of 14. But nevertheless, we must learn to take crime prevention measures and work together.

The rakyat must help do their part. Stop domestic crimes and ensure safety of their children, their homes and their possessions like cars. Support and be active in Rukun Tetangga activities, be ready to cooperate with the authorities, for example, be willing to report and be witness to any crime committed. At shopping malls, owners must install CCTV and engage security guards.

On the government's part, we have allocated RM8bil under the 9th Malaysia Plan which includes the purchase of high technology integrated communication system. For the

new police stations, we want to install CCTVs inside lockups and CCTVs would also be installed at streets and public places by local councils. In addition, over 3,000 patrol cars and 4,000 motorcycles have been purchased. The government has also approved the recruitment of 60,000 police personnel over the next five years.

The current police training academy cannot accommodate a surge in trainees, more centres need to be built first. The ratio of police to the population ideally should be 1:250 people but, in Subang Jaya for example, the ratio is 1:3,000. So we need to improve the situation.

Police districts which are too big should be broken up to smaller units to fight crime better. For the short term, we have decided to rent or lease shoplots in town centres to be used as police stations. This way the people have better access to the police. Four areas have been targeted for more intensive police surveillance and operations. They are Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Kinta Valley, Penang, and the IDR in Johor.

The media, once again, must also not cause too much panic among the public. It would be made to seem as if crime was uncontrollable when in actuality the police have been working very hard. It was recently found that our police's response time to a crime in progress is higher than the Interpol average. We are (snaps finger) very quick. Our crime solving rate is better than the Interpol average.

But that aside, I have told (Tan Sri) Musa (Hassan, the Inspector-General of Police) to make sure that the money that has been allocated is utilised quickly and that whatever instructions that have been given are implemented.

New faces, the keris and Chinese education

Wong: Will we see newer faces in the impending general election and possibly of even senior leaders giving way? You have mentioned before that there are credible candidates with great quality. What about Mentris Besar moving to contest in parliamentary seats?

Abdullah: Maybe. I will study a number of different factors.

Wong: There have been DAP ceramahs in Penang recently with posters of Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein wielding the keris.

Abdullah: I think enough has been said, but of course the opposition wants to play up the issue. I think attacks on Hisham(muddin) as being anti-Chinese is unfair, especially since he has done a lot for Chinese schools. That's a fact. He has been a fair politician. The MCA and the Chinese educationists can give you the statistics of his work. In fact, he is currently helping missionary schools to renew their land leases.

Hindraf and poverty

Wong: What about the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) issue? Will this affect the votes, especially the Indians in the coming general election?

Abdullah: Yes I think votes will be affected somewhat.

Wong: Towards this end, what is being done to address their grievances, especially in terms of poverty? And what about the recent cases of Hindu temples?

Abdullah: I have given instruction that whatever grouses they have should be attended to. We take these matters seriously and I have even made time to listen to them. It is not as if we are not doing anything. We have been working hard to eradicate poverty all this while. We have reduced it (the poverty rate) to 3.5% and hardcore poor is down to 0.7%, although obviously there are still poor people in the country. Of course our job is not done yet, but we have made a lot of progress.

There are not just poor Indians, but also poor Chinese, Malays and other bumiputra as well. This is why eradicating poverty among Malaysians, and I stress the word Malaysians, has been on our agenda and remains one of our priorities.

As for the Hindu temples, I have asked the MB to let the Hindu organisations decide for themselves how they intend to tackle the number of illegal temples in Selangor.

Wong: Malaysians are worried over how we will be affected due to fears of a US recession.

Abdullah: I was in Davos recently and the dominant topic of discussion was whether the US would go into recession or whether it would just be a slowdown. Many of the corporate leaders who came to see me also brought up this issue. I told them that although there would be some effect on the Malaysian economy, we are quite resilient. We have been managing our economy prudently and now we can see the success and the value of that approach. Our deficit has been reduced from 5.3% in 2003 to 3.2% in 2007. Our reserves are now over US\$101 billion. Market capitalisation of Bursa Malaysia is over RM1tril. The ringgit has strengthened from RM3.80 (to US\$1) to RM3.20. So we are in good economic health.

Number two, we have diversified our trade partners. The US is still an important trade partner of course, but our trade with China, India and the Middle East has grown and ASEAN will be more important to us going forward.

Finally, about 86% of our GDP is domestic driven. Domestic consumption and investment is up and high commodity prices have been good for us. With all of this, I believe we will continue to grow.

This is not to say that things will not be challenging. We are an open economy and not disconnected from the rest of the world. But our policies are good. A strong and stable government has allowed us to manage our development well and we will continue to need that strength and stability. Stability was the biggest attraction for a lot of the companies that I met in Davos. We have been able to plan and implement good policies because the country has been peaceful and we have enjoyed stability. So we must continue to safeguard it.

The interview was transcribed by Paul Choo