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interview with 25

Abdullah Badawi

'We all are in this together'

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Lending his support to *The Star's* Voices of Moderation campaign, former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urges every Malaysian to keep the light of moderation shining bright.

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MODERATION has never been far from the heart and mind of Malaysia's fifth prime minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

After the May 13 riots in 1969, Abdullah, who was then secretary of the National Operations Council, witnessed first-hand how Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and his deputy Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman brought Malaysia back from the brink of being a failed state.

What he saw then was the commitment of Malaysia's founding fathers to moderation, acceptance, and tolerance, as well as their opposition to radical and extreme views especially in politics and religion.

These values would colour his own later political career, helping him gain the trust of Malaysians when he led Barisan Nasional to a record sweep of 90% of seats in the Dewan Rakyat in the 2004 general election.

Abdullah defines moderation as an avoidance of excess or extremes especially in one's behaviour and political opinions.

With a movement to promote moderation gaining steady momentum following the launch of *The Star's* Voices of Moderation campaign in August last year, the former prime minister has come forward to lend his support.

In a special interview with *Sunday Star*, Abdullah shares his views on why moderation is important for Malaysia, and what every citizen can do to keep its light shining bright.

Though retired, the now 75-year-old remains passionate about unity among Malaysians.

At one point in the interview, he tightly grasped the palms of his hands to emphasise how moderation can help bridge differences between communities in multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysia.

"We must always think about

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how to get the people together, because we are all in this ship, and we must make sure our ship does not sink.

"We cannot think, for example, that only the Malays have a place here and others do not, so goodbye to them. No such thing. We all are in this together."

> To you, what is moderation and why does it matter greatly to Malaysia as a country?

The definition of moderation – if I look at the context of a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural Malaysia – is the avoidance of excess or extremes, especially in one's behaviour and political opinions. Malaysia has three major racial groups – Bumiputras, Chinese and Indians – but we are also a nation of more than 100 ethnic and sub-ethnic groups.

In fact, while many people talk about May 13 as the one black spot in our history since independence in 1957, I would rather like to think that we have lived together for much longer than that, since the 19th century when the British started bringing in Indians and Chinese.

In all these years, we have exercised restraint, discipline, fairness and justice that allowed us to live in peace together. May 13 was one black spot in close to 200 years and while I wish it had never happened, perhaps it should answer your question on why moderation matters in Malaysia.

My question is if we allow the extremists and bigots to sabre-rat and drown out the moderates, will there be peace? The answer is no.

> Is moderation still strongly practised in our country, or are we becoming less moderate?

The majority of Malaysians, I believe, are moderates. Their voices are being heard in social media forums and in public more and more. However, I am saddened that in recent years the rabble rousers, sabre-rattlers and bigots seem to be having a louder voice in politics and in the media. I do not think we are becoming less moderate; perhaps the extremists in our society are becoming louder and therein lies the danger. Let us not forget that in Nazi Germany, it was said that only 5% believed in Hitler; the other 95% were cowed into silence. Edmund Burke has always been widely quoted and I would like to use his quotation as I believe it is apt: "The only things necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

> During your administration as prime minister, you promoted the concept and policy of Islam Hadhari. Does Islam Hadhari involve promoting moderation, among others?

Islam Hadhari was introduced based on 10 principles and the basis was in the context of a multi-ethnic society like ours to make Muslims understand how progress is a part of Islam, which includes modernity, values, substance and, at the same time, Islam does not discriminate against non-Muslims. Malaysia includes an important component of a non-Muslim majority of 33%. Islam Hadhari was intended to show by example that an Islamic country like ours could be modern and progressive and govern all people fairly and justly. In fact, if you recall, many Muslim countries endorsed the concept as it was explained. Islam Hadhari's concept of moderation was a comprehensive approach to the development of mankind, society and country based on the perspective of Islamic teachings

and Islamic civilisation.

> Since 2008 especially, there have been numerous cases of Malaysians arguing about race and religion and spouting extreme views. Are you worried about this trend and what is your advice?

I am saddened by what is happening. The political leadership has to take a firm stand against those espousing extreme views. We cannot be wishy-washy about it. But more than that, the moderating voices must speak up more, and louder. In the last general election, some of the strident and more vocal extremists were voted out. Perhaps that is one way the moderates can make their voice heard. But most of all, I hope that politicians, non-governmental organisations, and not to forget, ordinary Malaysians, must all return to the vision of our founding fathers. We have done well as a country and a people since 1957 because we largely adhered to this vision.

> You have travelled far and wide. Did you observe or come across good examples of moderation in practice in other countries which we could perhaps emulate?

Many countries, not only the newly independent ones but developed countries as well which had some measure of multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, have always looked upon Malaysia as a model of a melting pot, of how different races and ethnic groups could live in peace despite having different religions and beliefs. In all my travels, I have never come across any other country which I would like to exchange my beloved Malaysia for.

We may be having hiccups now but I believe we are still a model of how a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural country should be. We should not and cannot allow the more extreme

elements to hijack this country from us.

> You were part of the National Operations Council (NOC) after the 1969 riots. How important was the value of moderation for the team of leaders, including in trying to place Malaysia back on track after the riots?

I witnessed May 13 and at that time, I served two great visionaries – Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman – who brought the country back from the brink of becoming a failed state. As part of the NOC, I saw the commitment of our founding fathers to moderation, acceptance, tolerance, reasonableness. I saw their opposition to radical and extreme views of measures, especially in politics or religion. I have said this many times over the years to my friends and family – I pray to Allah s.w.t that Malaysia never has to go through anything like that, ever.

> Lately, there have been individuals and groups who have come forward with different views on the way forward for Malaysia. Terms like moderates, liberals and extremists have been tossed about. These groups include the G25 group of former civil servants. What do you make of this debate?

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress." I believe that debate is good. But like Gandhi said, there has to be honest disagreement; we cannot have people trying to shut out others or lord their view over others and by this, I mean those who have extreme views. History has proven that extremes – as Eisenhower once said – to the right or to the left are always wrong. In any debate, moderation must prevail. That is the only way to critically examine issues and to make informed judgments.