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Steering a path to unity and strength

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THE book-lined library at Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's official residence in Putrajaya is both cosy and opulent. The bookshelves are on a raised balcony overlooking a stylish room designed to relax in, as well as host meetings and entertain guests.

There are paintings and framed photographs of the Prime Minister with international figures, ranging from kings and queens to political and religious heads.

Najib seems to have met everybody worth meeting in the world.

He is not into literary fiction and confesses a love for books on military history and strategy. Now we know how he managed to fend off attempts to unseat him the last two years.

The week leading to the Umno general assembly is always a fast-paced time for Umno leaders.

But he was in a relaxed and upbeat mood, removing his tie as he settled down to talk to *The Star* team comprising editor-in-chief Datuk Leanne Goh, mStar executive editor Rozaid Abdul Rahman, associate editor Joceline Tan, Umno general assembly team leader Razak Ahmad, photographer Raja Faisal Hishan and videographers Juliana Fawziah and Patrick Chin.

He returned from the Apec Summit in Peru on Wednesday and has been going non-stop since then.

He found the mood at Apec circumspect in view of the global economic slowdown and the political transition in the United States.

The key is to persevere and be resilient. I'm an optimist that there will be an upswing. Life is like that as in politics.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak

It was an opportunity for him to thank President Barack Obama for his pivotal role in Asian policy and to meet up with President Xi Jinping with whom he had bonded, especially after his immensely successful trip to China.

Najib is one of the few Asian leaders able to connect with international leaders from the centres of western capitalism to the heartland of Chinese communism.

It is not difficult to see why. He is polished, he speaks the Queen's English and has a way with words; a great deal of his confidence comes from his upbringing and years of experience in government. He moves with social ease in high and powerful society, understands international politics and holds his own among world leaders.

He believes that prayer empowers the mind, works out to keep fit and his downtime involves watching TV.

He is playing golf today with some 300 or so past and present Umno division leaders whom he calls the "power-brokers" and "movers and shakers" in the party.

But next week is about going back to where the power comes from.

The last Umno general assembly was tumultuous and a showdown of sorts.

The storm has blown over, he said he is more relaxed and has a team that is on the same page as him. It is time to move and face the general election.

The following are excerpts from the interview:

One year after the dramatic general assembly of 2015

It's been quite a tumultuous journey but you have to take it philosophically in politics.

Your experience in politics and in life is never linear. It always has ups and downs, moments of ascendancy and moments where you will face challenge.

The key is to persevere and be resilient. I'm an optimist that there will be an upswing. Life is like that as in politics.

On Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk

Seri Shafie Apdal

These people "grew up" with me and I was responsible for bringing them up to their position. But I have come to terms that there will be betrayals in politics.

Even in the United States, you see the brutal politics and drama that unfolded, the harsh words. There was nothing poetic about the presidential election.

Are you stronger today in Umno?

I have a good team now, a good deputy in Datuk Zahid (Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi), I have Hisham (Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein) and I've got the others. We are all on the same page and we work well as a team.

It's good for Umno that people see we have a cohesive leadership. It doesn't mean we don't differ, we have very robust discussions.

But once we decide on something, we fully implement it as a team. I believe what happened strengthened Umno's leadership and we have a much more united leadership.

Holding on to Johor

Umno was born in Johor, the Umno tradition is very strong in Johor and I believe we will still have our bastion in Johor.

Fascination with China

What's interesting and almost an irony is that a single party system in China can do two things. It can engender good leadership that believes in the principle of meritocracy. You have to prove yourself every step of the way.

If you trace Xi Jinping's history, he started as deputy mayor, then mayor, then governor and so on. He was tested every step of the way. So they are able to pick the best to become future leaders.

Secondly, it's interesting to look at how they could engender big entrepreneurs, the movers and shakers, the Jack Ma (executive chairman of Alibaba Group), the Wang of the world (Wang Jianlin, chairman of Wanda Group). How on earth did a single party political system spawn so many movers and shakers? They are so creative and able to invest huge amounts of capital in China and abroad. That fascinated me.

It defies Western thinking that you've got to have western democracy, individualism, not too much control, only then can you create innovation and spawn creativity.

But the results say otherwise. The outcome has made China the most exciting place on earth today. It is the happening place and nowhere else can compare with what I saw in China.

Opposition in disarray

I think people see that the Opposition is dysfunctional, it keeps changing - from Barisan Alternatif to Pakatan Rakyat to Pakatan Harapan. It booted out PAS and took on board PAN (Parti Amanah Negara). They cannot decide who should be Prime Minister, they cannot have a shadow Cabinet.

There is a big difference between running a state and running a country. From Minister to Deputy Prime Minister to becoming Prime Minister, there was a huge leap in responsibilities.

You might be reasonably successful running a state but running a nation is challenging and complex. From Perlis to Sabah, it's a whole different ballgame. If we get it wrong, the consequences will be terrible for all Malaysians.

TN50 - the new national vision

I didn't want to do it the Wawasan 2020 way, I wanted it to come from the bottom up. The Government will have to put it together later on and it will be the guiding vision for the next 30 years.

Khairy Jamaluddin was the ideal choice being the Umno Youth chief and Barisan Youth chief.

Message for the party assembly

I want people to feel this is a united Umno and for their spirits to be high. I want them to believe we can achieve success. At the same time I want Umno to have its feet anchored to the ground, to be humble even with power.

Serve the people and they will have confidence in Umno and Barisan.

Go to thestar.com.my to read the full interview.