

## **SUNDAY INTERVIEW: 'Dr M had a personal grudge against me'**

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**By P. Selvarani**

*REVELATION: In a candid interview with P. Selvarani, former MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, who is now Malaysia's special envoy for infrastructure to India and South Asia, claims former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad played a role in his shocking defeat to a political novice at the last general election in 2008*

**Question: You held the post of MIC president for 31 years. What was the most painful part for you when you let go of the party leadership?**

**Answer:** I let go of the post happily. While I was the president, I also became the minister of works and I had the political clout to do more things for the community. When I contested the last general election (March 2008), I decided it would be my last term in office.

I told my people that there are other younger leaders who should come forward and take over and manage the party. If I had been forced to go, it would have been painful. But it was a gradual and peaceful transition.

**Question: Do you feel that you have left the party in good hands?**

**Answer:** I have left the party. I don't want to make any comments. But I only hope that the party is built to the same strength it was.

**Question: Are you disappointed with the way MIC is being run now?**

**Answer:** I won't say I am disappointed. I am not the president of MIC but I still have contact with all the leaders. Some people think because I have left the MIC leadership, I am a nobody. But time will show whether I am somebody or not. Every day, I talk to branch leaders. They are the grassroots, that is where the votes lie. We make them happy, they bring double results. We don't make them happy, they feel rejected.

**Question: Are you saying the party leadership is not touching base with the grassroots?**

**Answer:** I feel the (election) machinery has not moved yet. It's not just about leaders moving here and there. At every place, the local machinery has to work. Similarly, the Indian voter machinery has to work. Otherwise, we may lose some votes here and there.

**Question: How do you think MIC will fare in Sungai Siput this time?**

**Answer:** I still go there to meet old friends. There is a coffee shop called Teratai. It's the first coffee shop in Sungai Siput. When I am there, people rush to shake my hand. I see a lot of change in the thinking of the Chinese, Indians and even Malay voters. The Malay votes are important.

The MIC candidate will stand a good chance this time because that constituency started developing from 1978 when I became minister. From that time, I had a master plan to develop Sungai Siput. You can go and see what I have done.

**Question: You have defended the seat since 1974. What was the first thought that crossed your mind when you lost the seat to a relative unknown in the 2008 election?**

**Answer:** It is nobody's mistake why I lost. We won all the previous elections. But when we attempted to bring back Sungai Siput voters from the outside to vote, 1,600 of them came (and) I lost the election. Don't blame the Sungai Siput people. And this time, 2,000 Indians moved out. All the outstation voters we brought in, voted against us.

(In the 2008 general election, Samy Vellu was defeated in the Sungai Siput parliamentary seat by Parti Keadilan Rakyat's Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj by a 1,821-vote majority. The independent candidate Nor Rizan Oon polled 864 votes. There were 1,001 spoilt votes.)

**Question: Why did you lose?**

**Answer:** Someone instigated the Malay voters not to vote for me.

**Question: The instigator was from outside Barisan Nasional?**

**Answer:** No, no, it was from within. The person was also in politics.

**Question: What do you think of BN's chances in the next elections?**

**Answer:** Barisan Nasional will not lose. It is a strong coalition and there is every reason for them to win. It is the only one which has ruled this country for more than 50 years and built a nation.

In the rest of the world, you can never see a nation like this. It's Barisan that built this. Barisan still can go forward provided they meet the needs of the new generation of voters.

**Question: But there is still some squabbling in the coalition?**

**Answer:** If you want to see squabbling, you look at the (political) parties in India. But here, the alliance that was forged by (first prime minister) Tunku Abdul Rahman is still there. It has been enlarged to become BN. And through his leadership, we can see the understanding and brotherhood built between the communities. Tun Hussein Onn was a strict man (when it came to) law and order.

Then came (Tun Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad). Dr Mahathir, prior to the (2008) election, told the people "Don't vote for Samy Vellu". Where did the 1,001 spoilt votes come from? Because of his advice (to) Malay voters. He told Umno (members) "don't vote for Samy Vellu".

**Question: But why would he do that?**

**Answer:** He had a personal grudge. But I don't hold a grudge against him. I always think of him as the greatest leader of this country. He is the builder of this nation. I'll say it again and again... the greatest experience I had was working with Dr Mahathir for 22 years.

**Question: It must have really upset you when you found out?**

**Answer:** It did upset me. After I lost, voters came to me and said: "Datuk Seri, tahu tak mengapa kita tak undi? Dr Mahathir sudah kata jangan undi Datuk Seri." (Datuk Seri, do you know why we did not vote for you? Dr Mahathir told us not to vote for you.)

That hurt a lot but it doesn't in any way reduce my respect for him. I call him the builder. Why is Malaysia so modern? Mahathir.

Why is Malaysia known to the world? Mahathir. Why do people feel we are tough? Because of the tough rule of Mahathir.

All this modernisation. I always say "Malaysia modernised by Mahathir... MMM" (smiles ).

When he said he resigned at the (Umno) general assembly, I cried. The first person I rang up was (Tan Sri) Rafidah (Aziz) and asked her what was happening. Then, we all came to Kuala Lumpur. To see him, talk to him.

You know, that's a different generation of leaders. Now, people can say Mahathir didn't do this properly, Mahathir didn't do that properly. It's easy to talk. He is a great man. I always pray for him. I ask God to give him (a) long life.

**Question: Did you feel backstabbed?**

**Answer:** You see, there are reasons he (Dr Mahathir) felt hurt. I'll tell you now. The people also must know. He was close to me. Why was he hurt? He wanted to bring the IPF (Indian Progressive Front), (the late Tan Sri M.G.) Pandithan's party into Barisan. Everybody (other BN component party leaders) agreed (but), I said no.

The third time, he told me: "I want them to be inside", I just kept quiet. Then when the voting was done, (I said) "No, sir, I don't agree". That is the reason the friendship we had is gone. It's because of IPF. Nothing else.

After I voted (against it), he looked at me like that (from the corner of the eyes), shook his head, shrugged and said: "Okaylah, we lost!"

**Question: How is your relationship with Dr Mahathir now?**

**Answer:** If he sees me anywhere, I just shake hands with him. I look at it this way, he is older than me. He may be right, I may be wrong.

**Question: It's magnanimous of you.**

**Answer:** I pray to God to give him (a) long life. Sometimes, when I am alone (welling up with tears), I think of him and cry. Because such a good leader, the country has never had before. Of course, besides Datuk Seri Najib (Razak).

He (Tun Dr Mahathir) is a great man. Great, great, great man. I don't think we will have one like him (voice starts to choke and he reaches out for a tissue). Great planner, great implementor, great thinker. I never said one word against him.

**Question: Coming back to MIC, is it on the right track keeping in mind the current political scenario?**

**Answer:** I don't think the country has ever encountered the kind of challenges we are facing now. This is the greatest challenge to BN in its existence of more than 50 years. To face these challenges, we have to re-organise ourselves and strengthen the

grassroots by giving leaders on the ground more independence to do the work, get the voters and get ready for the battle. That is a big job for the party leadership.

**Question: Are you saying that they did not have this independence before?**

**Answer:** In the past, before the prime minister announced the election, I would have set up an election committee. We would have had meetings all over the states. And we'll meet every branch leader and find out the number of voters, both from within and outside MIC. We will then approach them and find out their problems.

**Question: If that was what MIC was doing, why is it that many of the Indian votes did not go to BN in the last elections?**

**Answer:** The reason is, to tell you the truth, the government did not understand the importance of the Indian voters all this while. I have been fighting in the cabinet for almost 29 years, putting forward their problems one after the other. Every time we have an economic conference, we present papers, the papers will go to the government but when they come back, there is nothing.

**Question: Why?**

**Answer:** Because at that time, BN was strong. And MIC was a small party. I think that was the attitude at that time. The Indians were angry because they lost so many things in the process. And they wanted to just show their anger. And that is what happened in the last elections.

**Question: Were they also venting out their anger at MIC because it was the biggest party representing Indians in the cabinet? People are saying that if not for Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force) and groups like that, the government would not be giving Indians the kind of recognition that they are giving now.**

**Answer:** No, no, no, no. If Hindraf is responsible for this, why didn't they do it 10 years earlier? It was a political gimmick. Of course, they created some unrest in the mind of Indians. There are two ways of doing it. One is to go to the streets and do it. The other is to sit with the people and discuss with them, ask them for their support.

**Question: Why is it that despite MIC fighting for the rights of Indians all these years, it is only recently over the past two years that the government is recognising the needs of the community, such as giving stateless Indians citizenship and MyKad?**

**Answer:** I call this "mentality change".

**Question: On the part of?**

**Answer:** The government. If Najib was not the prime minister, this won't happen. It's one man. One man decided change must be made. That one man is running throughout the country. Everybody is thinking that one man's work is enough. I don't. But the BN government has changed its attitude and has come out with new programmes. You can see this change.

**Question: What is your most memorable moment as party president?**

**Answer:** It's the completion of the Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST). I still enjoy looking at the architecture of the building, which was done by Hijjas Kasturi, one of the best architects in the country. Second, is the establishment of

the Maju Institute of Educational Development (MIED) which has now educated 14,500 students.

And we concentrated on the Tamil schools. I started in 1985 to build Tamil schools after a big struggle with Dr Mahathir to get the money. Dr Mahathir is the first one who gave money to the minister of works to start. He gave me RM5 million. Later, Tun Daim (Zainuddin) and he jointly approved RM14 million. Then another RM20 million. During my time, I built about 78 new Tamil schools. Tamil schools are my life because I came from a Tamil school.

**Question: Recently, you were quoted as saying that Indians should be grateful to BN for building and repairing Tamil schools and you received a lot of flak for that statement.**

**Answer:** I didn't say that. I said that Indians should be thankful to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak for having taken so much interest in the rebuilding of Tamil schools. I was misquoted.

**Question: But isn't it the duty of the government to provide such facilities?**

**Answer:** It is the duty of the government but it is also in our culture to say thank you. So even if it is your duty to feed me, I still say "thank you". The reason I say Tamil schools is important is because (the issue of) Tamil schools can be political sometimes. Datuk Seri Najib has given about RM350 million now to Tamil schools. And if the government goes on like that, all Tamil schools in the country will have a new image.

**Question: After the last election, we find a lot of young voters talking about moving away from race-based politics. What are your views?**

**Answer:** Fundamentally, we are Malaysians. When we are Malaysians, we still entertain other cultures. I think people are moving closer together. There will come a day when I won't say I am an Indian, somebody won't say he is a Malay, another won't say he is a Chinese. But it will take a lot of time.

**Question: In the light of this new kind of thinking, do you think MIC will still be relevant?**

**Answer:** MIC is still relevant for the community. Otherwise, there will be no one to raise their needs to the government.

**Question: Your detractors have always accused you of ruling with an iron fist when you were MIC president, to make sure that everyone toes the line. Do you think it was a fair portrayal of your leadership style?**

**Answer:** (Laughs) I have never used a fist to ask people to toe the line. I ask them to follow the Constitution. The Constitution is above anybody else. During my time, you would have seen a lot of people becoming state assemblymen, members of parliament. They never made any complaint. When I was there, unity was there. I united this party into one. Even if I see an enemy, I will say "hey, how are you?" and shake his hand.

Even when there were suggestions that Subra (former deputy MIC president Datuk S. Subramaniam), who used to contest against me, and I work together, I said "okay". We had a meeting at the Hyatt Singapore over lunch one day, we discussed. You know how long we discussed? Only five minutes. After that, we worked together for many years.

**Question: So, all this talk about your deputies falling out of favour with you are not true?**

**Answer:** Some people created them purposely to degrade MIC.

**Question: So, there was no friction between you and Datuk Subramaniam?**

**Answer:** No, no. Sometimes, Subra contested against me for the presidency. Then after that, I won, he lost. We go for makan, and we finish it there (laughs).

**Question: In all your years in politics, do you have any regrets?**

**Answer:** Human beings always feel that something should have been done and I am still continuing to do it, sitting at MIED. We are still working on the education part. And then on the university side, we want more students to come and we are trying to find more ways to help the poor.

We have the Yayasan Pemulihan Sosial which helps the poor. I am now chairman of Yayasan MIED and AIMST. I have no regrets. I am happy and my mind is clear now.

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