

**Interview With Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad
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PUTRAJAYA, Feb 16 (Bernama) -- Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is still active and continues to work although already having retired almost 10 years as Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Although his age is almost reaching 88 years (Date of Birth - July 10, 1925), the former prime minister goes to his office each working day while on weekends, delivers talks when invited to do so.

He also actively writes, in his Che Det blog besides contributing articles to The News Straits Times and Utusan Malaysia.

In an interview with Bernama journalists Abdul Aziz Harun, Massita Ahmad, Zairulliaty Mali and Prem Kumar Panjamorthy at his office here recently, Dr Mahathir shared his thoughts and hopes on the importance of unity among the races in Malaysia, the upcoming general election, economic matters and the future of national automobile maker Proton, of which he is the advisor.

Below is the full transcript of the interview:

Question: Tun appears to be very healthy. How is Tun keeping up because after 10 years of retiring, Tun is still very active?

Tun M: Generally, I can still move, can talk, even go horse riding, but of course when old there are times to a certain extent, fatigue and illness like cough set in, it's all normal. But about doing work, I do my work as normal. I go to the office on working days and even on weekends, I am invited to give talks, so I work full time. Thank God I still can.

Question: There are some people who upon retirement retire completely but Tun is still active, does Tun have targets still to be achieved?

Tun M: Before, when I was a practising doctor I used to advise anyone who was retiring to continue to be active because once we retire and don't do anything, we will be susceptible to fall sick. This is what I observed. A lot of people on retiring withdraw from society, this is not healthy. That is why I took my own advice, that on retirement must remain active and my passion is still in the realm of politics, that's why I am still active in politics. Because I want to take care of my health and I'm still interested in political developments in our country.

Question: Any other activities besides politics Tun?

Tun M: I read a lot of books, I write this and that, I have a blog, I also write articles for (The New) Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia, and I get many letters from abroad which I try to reply. In addition, many people come to see me from within and outside the country and as far as I can, I try to meet them. These are my activities. I also try to exercise a bit, do the treadmill, sometimes lift dumbbells, go horse riding, walking, these are normal for me.

Question: In every (general) election, the situation for the contesting parties is "do or die". In the next election, is it the same?

Tun M: The situation is different. Cracks in our society in general have become so much deeper. In my time there was also division especially among the Malays, who belonged to different parties, but support for Umno was very strong and the general populace was

more interested in supporting Umno than other parties. Even when there were splits like when Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah) set up the Semangat 46 party, they were not able to draw many Umno members. Datuk Seri Anwar (Ibrahim) was a bit more successful but still could not defeat Umno. That is why the BN's (Barisan Nasional's) victory in 1999 was still very big although there were many Malays who thought that Anwar had been persecuted and thus withdrew their support (for Umno) but the Chinese were solidly behind the BN, we still got two-thirds (majority).

But later, we got an administration that did not focus on the people's needs, but instead they more interested in enriching themselves and things like that. The leaders were also the same, leaders at all levels were also looking for opportunities from politics to line their own pockets. Because of this the people began to lose their trust (in the BN). But (Prime Minister) Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has taken steps to correct the situation and has somewhat succeeded.

Question: Voters under the age of 40 are young voters. How was the scenario before this? Because there some who say 40 per cent of the voters now are aged under 40 years. Before this how was the young voters' support for the government?

Tun M: Before, young people went through the early days (of the country) to now. For example, the young people first went through the time when there was not much development in Malaysia, in fact we were considered a backwater country then. Then they saw rapid changes taking place during their time and they appreciated the changes. But the youth now were born after the country had developed. For them, this is the country they know.

They did not experience the situation when the country was poor, when they did not have opportunities to work, did not get a chance to get a good education, did not get the chance to become professionals. Before no. Now this is considered normal. And when we consider something as commonplace we do not really appreciate it. We only appreciate it when we get something we never could.

But they were born at a time when our nation was already advanced and for them this was something normal. So they do not appreciate it and instead are exposed to influences from the West such as freedom and much more, and they feel they are not quite free. Still restricted in this and that. They see in the West everyone is free to do what they like, and this causes them to be dissatisfied.

They want more freedom and so on, so they want to see change happen. For them change will come only if the opposition wins in the general election. Because the opposition has promised to bring about change. But whatever is said by the BN, for instance, is not effective. Although it is true and real but not effective because they are obsessed with the belief that a change in government will make a difference in their lives. This is the reason why the situation is different from the past.

Question: The approach adopted by Datuk Seri Najib may differ from before to reach out to the young people, is the approach working well so far?

Tun: There is some success but not enough because the of situation of the party, according to the people's perception, is not so good

Question: Perhaps there is much to be done by Datuk Seri Najib?

Tun M: He does not have much time left, very soon there will be the general election, how much more can be done. Anytime (the general election), so we have to go down to the ground, see as many people as possible and so on, (it's) difficult. So, it's a problem. New problems will arise and to address these problems it will take time, and he now is

running out of time. But I think he has done his best. He works very hard.

Question: How was Tun's own experience? With the election nearing, there appear to be many demands from within the party and outside the BN. They are just taking advantage of the election to make all sorts of demands?

Tun M: During my time the people will not know when the election will be called, so before they make any demands the election will be upon them. But if we wait till the last minute to dissolve Parliament, there is no longer the surprise element. So the closer the election the more the demands.

Question: But Datuk Seri Najib needs time?

Tun M: Yes, I believe he needs time.

Question: Quite drastic demands from the non-Malays, how does Tun see him to be able to balance these demands with those within the party and also from outside parties?

Tun M: We are in a quandary. For instance, demands made by opposition parties that touch on the position of the Malays. If the Malays want to answer, if they don't answer well, they will look like racists. They place more importance on race than a Malaysian race, so we find the Malays do not want to answer for fear of being accused (of various things). Thus they only feel angry. They cannot fight back, they get angry but this is not so effective. This is a problem for the Malays and also a problem for other races because we see now there is greater polarisation compared to before.

Question: Perhaps this is a touchpoint that needs to be addressed by Datuk Seri Najib, striving for greater unity?

Tun M: Yes, we have 1Malaysia and so on but it's a slogan. We should get acceptance from all races, but I notice that the response is coming more from the Malays only.

Question: So much more remains to be done for the non-Malays? When more is done for the non-Malays, demands from within the party (Umno) also peak.

Tun M: I think the demands of non-Malays've have been entertained a lot. But when they think they will be the kingmakers in the (upcoming) election, they will come up with all sorts of demands.

Question: What about unity in Umno, because before it seems that the BN fared badly in the last general election due to internal weaknesses rather than the strength of the opposition?

Tun M: I think the situation has eased a bit. Before, of course if not chosen as a candidate, the person replaced would make sure the candidate selected will lose. But I see now this has cooled down a bit. They have made pledges that they will not sabotage, but we have to wait until the election to know whether they will hold to their promises or not.

Question: Tun's advice to them?

Tun M: They should remember that if this practice of sabotaging continues, even if they are the candidates they will also lose, they will also be sabotaged as well. The important thing is not their winning, it is important the party wins. For the party to win, the party's candidates must be given victory. Whether we like the candidate or not that is other question, if we don't let him win, the party will lose. If the party loses our position will obviously come under threat.

Question: What is your message to the Chinese voters?

Tun M: Since we became independent in 1957, the cooperation among the Malays, Chinese and Indians through Umno-MCA-MIC-Gerakan had brought a lot of progress to our country. It made our country stable. Because these three races agreed to share power. Because we shared, not Umno took all for Umno or MCA took all for them, but we were willing to share. Because we were willing to share (power) our country did not exhibit chaos and with that the country was able to be developed. If today, every race wants everything that they demand, this will result in other races not feeling satisfied, hence the country's stability will be affected and if it is affected, progress will not be achieved, the economy cannot grow and all of us cannot enjoy the benefits.

All races should understand this especially the Chinese who do business. They cannot do business in a situation where racial riots are happening.

Question: In Kedah, how do you see BN's chances?

Tun M: We have never lost in Kedah until 2008. Usually we won two thirds (majority) in Kedah. But disappointment and dissatisfaction cropped up among a majority of the people of Kedah who are Malays. They were disappointed and they made a decision not to support the BN. They voted for opposition parties even though they said they "felt painful" to do so. But I found out that now they have faith again in the BN and I am confident that there is a big possibility that BN can win in Kedah.

Question: So now arises the question of who will become the Kedah Menteri Besar (MB)?

Tun M: Who will become the MB, that is not important. What is important is winning. If we do not win no one can become the MB. If we continue to sabotage, the party will lose which means there will be no MB. Can become the opposition leader, now we already have an opposition leader in Kedah. If you want him to remain as opposition leader, then go ahead and sabotage.

Question: Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister is said to have met you in Langkawi for finding a peaceful solution the conflict in southern Thailand. Did the meeting really take place?

Tun M: I met with the governor (of southern Thailand) but I did not discuss specifically regarding this matter. We (my delegation) learnt that their government wants peace in southern Thailand but it will not be easy because the rebels there are split. Even if there are parties who agree to cease the insurgency, others might not agree. So while one party might sign an agreement (for peace), the others might do bombings and the like. This is the problem in southern Thailand. If there is only one body fighting for their cause and the decision is to made by that body, then we can end the insurgency, but so far, what I know is that they are split into factions and sometimes individuals act on their own.

Question: But did representatives from the Thai government side also come to see Tun recently?

Tun: Yes.

Question: So can Malaysia play a role as it did in the Philippines (helping broker peace between the Moro National Liberation Front and the Philippine government) by getting the various factions (in southern Thailand) to unite?

Tun M: This is actually Thailand's internal problem, so we cannot at all get involved

actively. However, there are these people who sometimes cross into Malaysia. So maybe we can try to persuade them to end their struggle, which can never be resolved, because they can never get independence.

That is what they have to accept. They will not get what they want even if they bang their heads against the wall. So we must accept reality, the truth.

Question: To become a developed nation in 2020, we must achieve an average of six per cent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth annually. But, for last year and this year, GDP is expected to grow around four and five per cent only. Will this affect the target of becoming a developed country?

Tun M: If we cannot achieve six per cent per year, in terms of numbers maybe we cannot achieve (becoming a developed country). But we are of the opinion that what is meant by 'developed nation' is in our own mould. What is important is that the people get the infrastructure facilities, not only in the cities, but in the rural areas as well. If we take into consideration, now in Kuala Lumpur we have already achieved developed status, however, we have to give focus to remote areas.

Question: Is the (country's) 53 per cent debt ratio to GDP still considered to be healthy?

Tun M: I think it is still healthy. Our revenue is increasing. Our trade is still positive. So, even if we take into account the 50 per cent mark, we have to remember that countries like Greece for example, their debt (ratio) is more than 100 per cent. They may not be able to pay (their debts). We can still pay. We can still pay and we can see high returns on investments. During my time, when Maybank made a profit of RM300 million we considered it to be very big. Now Maybank is making RM6 billion (in profit).

Question: Is our trade still dependent on the West?

Tun M: We are not depending anymore on the West. The west is deteriorating. Our exports to the West cannot grow and the West also cannot afford to invest at this moment. We find that our investments are coming from the East and our trade with the East is also growing. Our trade with China for instance is very good. . Our trade with Asean has also increased. So, we don't have to assess our economic progress based on our trade with the West. Instead, the assessment should take into account the economic progress Malaysia made around the world. Our exports to throughout the world are still on the uptrend, our surplus is still growing.

BNM (Bank Negara Malaysia) has US\$42 billion in savings... during my time it was only US\$30 billion. Our savings are huge, our saving is high... for example in Tabung Haji (the Pilgrims Fund). We have savings in PNB (Permodalan Nasional Bhd), many types of savings. There are also bodies like Felda (the Federal Land Development Authority). These are huge savings. We have big savings, very high.

Question: You have said that the country will become bankrupt if salary increments do not match productivity. Today, the government has increased government servants' salaries and stresses on KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Do you still hold to that statement?

Tun M: I still maintain that salary increments must come with productivity, if not we will have high cost. We will no longer be competitive in the world market. Our country is a trading country where development depends on trade. If we do not compete with other countries then our economic performance will deteriorate, that is why it is important that salary increments must be balanced with productivity hikes. We must also remember that when we raise salaries, the cost (of operations) becomes very high ... for example, we have the minimum wage. To determine the minimum wage we have to do an in-

depth research, because when we want to raise a person's salary, lets say his salary is RM700, we raise it to RM900, another person who is currently getting RM900, when he sees that a person under him is getting a raise to the same salary as he is, he will not be happy, he will also want a raise. When he gets the raise, the people above him will now feel unhappy. This will go on until the top level. This means it is not just a RM200 increment... the cost will run into the millions because the whole salary scheme needs to be adjusted to the minimum wage raise.

Question: Is Tun satisfied with DRB-HICOM?

Tun M: I am more satisfied with the current DRB-HICOM management then the previous management (of national carmaker Proton).

Question: You have said that Proton will never make cheap cars anymore, so does this mean that the car price will increase or will it come with better quality?

Tun M: It will increase (the price), but apart from that, the car quality will be enhanced, like the Preve model that we just launched, it was launched before it was ready to be launched, because of that, the first 1,000 cars launched had many problems, but the current Proton management have identified the problems and fixed them, so it is a car which has high technology, more or less the same with other cars (in the same range). So I hope the first impression regarding Preve can be eliminated, and they will use the Preve because it functions very well, not like when it was initially launched.

Question: At this time Tun, will Proton come back to glory because now we have brands like Toyota, Honda taking over the TIV (total industry volume)?

Tun M: I find that we are the only one who practice this open trade, we open our country to additional imports, so that cars from foreign countries come in, they are produced by giant companies which have recovered their overhead costs, all have been recovered, so they can sell (their cars) at low prices here because they have already recovered their investments, amortised completely because lets say they launch one model, they produce one million units, sell in other countries more than 900 thousand units and in Malaysia they sell 50,000 units, even if they reduce the price to half they still make a profit.

But Proton cannot do that because we produce limited numbers of cars of various models, our overhead cost is very high, if we are asked to compete with car manufacturers from developed countries, of course we cannot afford it, because now sale of Proton cars has decreased from 80 per cent to 26 per cent and we find that Malaysians themselves do not trust Proton, even if the price is cheap they will still not buy, even if the quality is good they will not buy because everyone wants to buy imported cars... because of the import brands and their reputations are so called better, but if we want to let Proton grow, if our own market does not want to help us, it is impossible for us to get help from other markets.

Question: So does this mean that Proton must focus on the export market?

Tun M: Yes, we must, and will go to the export market, this is indeed our plan, because our domestic market is too small, if we want to produce lets say 500 thousand cars per year, we must go to the export market, but at the same time our domestic market must accept us, if we open our country to too many imports, even though Proton produces quality cars and the price is cheap, but these foreign cars, regardless how many are sold, they still can reduce RM10,000 of the price, Proton cannot afford (to do that), because they (the foreign producers) gain profits in other places, they want to lower the price here so that they can penetrate the market, that is easy for them.

Question: And how about the green initiative?

Tun M: The green initiative, actually we talk a lot about the green initiative, many people do not realise.

Actually all cars (under the initiative) failed. Those who produced electric cars in developed countries, all failed, all could not achieve their set targets, but we are working on it, we also cannot achieve (the target), and so too on hybrid cars.

Hybrid (cars) too have not taken off and the battery cost is far too high, for one brand, up to four times of the cost of the car itself, a car that size using electricity, four times more expensive... who wants to buy?

That is why until now even though there is government subsidy, it (hybrid) still cannot sell. Not many Malaysian journalists know about this, but research should have been done to see what happened to companies which produced these electric cars, for example if they could sell it, what were their prices because the battery cost is very high? One battery is RM1,000, if we use 24 batteries means RM24,000, that is only the battery cost, sometimes more than that.

So, the conclusion is that if we want green we have to pay, but who wants to pay? People will think that if the price is too high, better for them to pay for instance, for ICE-powered cars, that is the internal combustion engine.

Question: Are you going to LIMA (International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition) this year?

Tun M: I have to go.. It is fun for me to watch aeroplanes.

Question: You are going to be 88 this year and normally for the Chinese the number 88 is 'ong' (lucky). So what are your hopes for this year?

Tun M: I do not know whether it is lucky or not, what I know is that I'm already 88. How long more do I have, I do not know, that is what is important. Sometimes even the young go first, but there is no escape for the old people.

Question: You are still active. You have retired for (almost) ten years but not seen to be slowing down.

Tun M: As long as we are healthy, we can work, why want to sit at home and do nothing?

Question: Regarding the election.. how about Pas?

Tun M: They can join Umno back but there must be adjustments. Like when they called three million Umno members as 'kafir' (infidels), 'murtad' (apostates), we cannot work with people who call us apostates. They must uphold Islamic teachings. That is not basic Islam teaching. In Islam you cannot simply call people 'kafir'. In Islam you must be fair, fair means that you only hand down sentences after going through all evidence. But (Datuk) Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (PAS spiritual leader and Kelantan Menteri Besar) easily says that all Umno members are 'kafir'. We have three million Umno members. Is it that easy to be called 'kafir'. Am I a 'kafir'? Now there is book 'Kafirkah Aku? (Am I a 'kafir')'. This is all politics. This is politics to win the election. So that all his supporters perceive me as a 'kafir'.

Question: How about Anwar's (Opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's) influence?

Tun M: Anwar just wants to become Prime Minister. He does not care. He will even sell his own soul. As long as he becomes Prime Minister. He forms Keadilan 'fairness' (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) not because of fairness, but because he wants to become Prime Minister. If he is the Prime Minister then only it is fair. Whatever it takes does not matter.

Question: But why in Pakatan they cannot come to an agreement who is going to become the Prime Minister?

Tun M: They (Pakatan) are not a coalition. Do not forget that this is not a coalition. BN (Barisan Nasional) is a coalition. It has one head. We sit together in one meeting. They do not have a coalition, they just want to win. After that when they become the government, PAS will go to one side, while DAP to the other side, Keadilan just want their leader to become Prime Minister, that is all.

Question: How do you see youths' support for Anwar?

Tun M: There are youths who realise (what he is up to). But there also are youths who are influenced by the West for instance. The BN has ruled for too long, they just want a change that is all. It is because they were born after we have developed. So they do not know conditions before we were developed, so they do not appreciate it. They receive scholarships, they receive education too is because of us. But now the Malays are taught not to say thank you, not to be grateful. Accept the RM500 (1Malaysia People's Aid) but do not vote (for the BN), do not say thank you. This is the new Malay culture. Do not say thank you.

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