

'Kongsi concept key to our peace and harmony'
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Back in the 1990s, when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was at the peak of his prime ministership (he was around 70 then), he was asked by reporters during one of his engaging media conferences on what made him tick, despite heart by-passes and other surgeries and ailments. A special diet, obviously, good genes, naturally, but more intriguingly, tantalising urban legends that he made annual pilgrimages to Switzerland for blood transfusions, besides gulping down a monthly fortune in exotic medication, the inquiry suggested. Chuckling at the proposition's outlandishness, Dr Mahathir had a succinct answer to his vitality: Pharmaton. It must be a zinger of a health supplement, because he still pops it regularly and as he approaches 88 years old in June, his elegant physique and probing mental acuity are robust enough to fell younger political opponents. In stepping down from his prime ministerial hot seat in October 2003 after a 22-year run, Dr Mahathir executed his final official duty. He has since accentuated his private citizenry that holds a potent grip on public imagination. The riptide of high profile critiques, observations, insights and missives, dispatched from his immensely popular blog and articulated over never-ending speaking engagements, elevated him into a statesman "intellectually licensed to kill" - his words probingly satirical, mocking and double-edged, not just aimed at domestic political foibles but also Western inanities and bullies. It is this formidable intellect, the one that constantly prods Malaysians with blunt assertiveness, biting clarity and historical didacticism that was demonstrated in a luxuriant 90-minute interview with NST journalists RASHID YUSOF, AZMI ANSHAR and ROZANNA LATIFF, and ZAHARI ZAKARIA, who captured an exquisite portrait of the ex-PM at his stylish 86th floor office at the Petronas Twin Towers.

Octogenarian, you exclaim, but Dr Mahathir's trademark penetrative posits and rippling ripostes were elemental in the range of questions and mini-commentaries posed to him.

He was cogent on the idea that the acceptance of kongsi leadership is the essence of Malaysian peace and harmony.

He postulated ideas on regaining Chinese support for the government and a deeper understanding on the insistence that in all negotiations, Chinese education is not to be compromised.

He had a dim view of Malay language nationalists who oppose the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English and yet, brazenly co-opts English words into the Malay vocabulary that erase legitimately practical Malay words.

He suggested that Margaret Thatcher stuck her neck out to save Britain from global oblivion and Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak worked harder than he ever did.

When he was reminded that his observations reminded us of a certain ex-PM, he quizzically looked around and beseeched: "Where? Where?"

All right, his wry sense of humour was gleefully intact, even as he mused earnestly over the cutlass overtures of Lim Kit Siang, the chameleon-like ins-and-outs of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the broken promises of Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who conveniently ignored his pledge to resign as Kelantan menteri besar if Dr Mahathir did so as PM.

The interview was finite, regrettably, ending just when things were getting to be more intriguing, but Dr Mahathir's private banter was as towering as the tallest twin towers in the world, which he helped conceive as the ultimate soapbox to inspire collective hopes and dreams.

Question: The media once asked what you took every day and you said (nutritional supplement) Pharmaton, and there are urban legends saying that you get blood transfusions every year in Switzerland.

Answer: I still take Pharmaton (laughs). People ask me all kinds of questions (about this), including whether I spend RM5,000 every day on medicine.

Question: There has been a change in the political outlook of segments of the Chinese community, who have been very supportive of the Alliance and Barisan Nasional (BN). What do you think has changed?

Answer: When we became independent, the Malays and Chinese were working closely together under the concept of kongsi, as mooted by Tunku Abdul Rahman. We shared. Sharing, of course, means that each (race) has to sacrifice something. That worked very well. It enabled the three races to work together and because of that, there was stability and the country was able to develop.

In 1964, (Singapore's) People's Action Party came in. Despite their agreement with Tunku not to contest in the peninsula, they came in, bringing with them the slogan "Malaysian Malaysia". The slogan implied that in Malaysia, there was no equality and that the Malays took everything for themselves.

That (argument) was actually rejected by the Chinese community in 1964 -- PAP lost and won only one seat. Subsequently, when Singapore left Malaysia, DAP took over that slogan and kept on preaching that there was inequality in Malaysia and therefore, they should force the Malays to give up whatever rights they may have.

Of course, they have never mentioned the rights of the Chinese and Indians, only Malay rights.

Unfortunately, Malays tended to merely defend themselves, but were not able to counter the DAP's "Malaysian Malaysia" argument.

Over the years, more and more people who were not conversant in the kongsi concept which launched Malaysia began to make comparisons and came to believe that there was no equality between the races, that the Malays took everything.

These younger people, not knowing the background or the need for us to kongsi, felt that they should be treated without any form of differentiation. So, they began to talk about meritocracy. This is played up by DAP. In 2004 and even 1999, (the Chinese support for BN in the general elections) was fantastic.

But (also) by 2004, what had begun to develop was a general disaffection for BN, for various reasons.

BN supporters, including members of the (component parties), even by those in Umno -- they rejected BN because they were not happy with the leadership.

As a result, Penang was won by the DAP. This gave DAP their first real victory and they thought that if they could push the idea of 'Malaysian Malaysia' and tell the Chinese that they are being discriminated against, then the Chinese would support them instead of MCA.

MCA, on its part, was embarrassed. They had been cooperating, but they have been called people who were used by Umno. They felt embarrassed and they tried to outdo the DAP in terms of being critical of so-called Malay domination. As you know, (DAP advisor) Lim Kit Siang has gone to Johor. The reason he's gone to (contest in) Gelang Patah is because it's a Chinese constituency. He depends on the Chinese to support him and the only way the Chinese will support him is if he can make them feel that they are unfairly treated in Malaysia. The good relationship between the Chinese and Malays, especially in Johor, has been undermined by Kit Siang, preaching 'Malaysian Malaysia'. It's about the assumption that the Chinese are badly treated in Malaysia, and therefore they should reject working together with the Malays.

Question: In a sense this political tone is the result of the Malaysian Malaysia concept getting a wider airing. Is that a fair assessment?

Answer: Yes, it is now accepted by a large number of people - younger people, especially. These people are not familiar with the struggle for independence, about the concept of sharing proposed by Tunku and (MCA founder) Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

All they know is that they were born and they were brought up at a time when Malaysia was already independent. They don't see anything good about sharing. Instead, they insist upon meritocracy, on merit alone.

Question: MCA, as a party, has had its ups and downs. It came back after suffering setbacks in the 1969 general election. Do you see a future for MCA - can the party rebound?

Answer: If you look at the history of MCA, you'll see a series of changes in their leadership. There is always a struggle in the party. When there is a struggle, there are factions. When one faction wins, the other faction refuses to support them.

The MCA is shrinking. Each time they have a confrontation between would-be leaders, one faction would withdraw because they lost. Another contests, another faction withdraws. It gets smaller and smaller. People feel they are not performing.

Question: Do you think the Chinese support for BN is underestimated or overstated?

Answer: There is support for the BN but of course, we have to know what are the expectations of the Chinese. In 1999, for example, the BN did extremely well, better than in 2004 - because it was the Chinese support who gave BN the two thirds majority. Why did the Chinese support the BN in 1999? It is because the BN helped them overcome the threat of bankruptcy, from the currency crisis. And because they were so very supportive of the BN, for the first time, Kit Siang and Karpal lost. They had never lost before. Of course, they regained the seats in 2004.

Question: By comparison, strong economy and the concept of Malaysian

Malaysia, which do you think is the more persuasive argument for the Chinese community?

Answer: I think the Chinese would still value their opportunities in business. If you take an environment where they can succeed in business, they would be supportive of the BN, which they did even when BN introduced the New Economic Policy. The NEP has in fact benefited the Chinese more than the Malays.

Question: Why hasn't the argument been made that the NEP has in fact benefited other races as well?

Answer: I must admit that the Malays are not very good at arguing and presenting facts. Instead, the Malays are very defensive. The Malays when accused of taking everything, will say "No, no, no, we are not - this is our entitlement. We are the tuan." Things like that.

That line of argument is all wrong.

Question: Back in the 90s, you said you asked each group - the Malays, Chinese and the Indians -whether they were happy. And each of them said they were unhappy. So you said, since nobody's happy - you've been fair. Do you still subscribe to that line of thinking?

Answer: I still do. I keep on telling people that in this country, no one should feel extremely happy, because if they feel happy, if one race feels happy, it means you're doing the wrong thing. You're helping that race too much. The thing is, you have to deny everyone something that they think they are entitled to. So they will all be unhappy, which means we are treating everyone equally.

Question: Is there a historical perspective, for why the Chinese schools were allowed to grow without much skepticism or question?

Answer: At the time, when we agreed that Chinese schools should be allowed to go on and finance primary schools by the government, there were still English-medium schools. Most Chinese students attended English schools, and the Chinese schools were quite deserted. But when they converted English schools to national schools, they migrated back to Chinese schools.

We did not expect the Chinese to return to Chinese schools because we expected the English schools to carry on. But when (now Tun) Datuk Abdul Rahman Yakub became the Minister of Education, he closed down the English schools and converted them all to national schools (except the ones in Sarawak). That is one factor.

Question: When you became Minister of Education in 1974, did you try to reverse this policy?

Answer: We had a lot of Malay language nationalists, who only think about the language and not about knowledge. To them, knowledge is not important as long as you speak Malay. If, at the time, one had said anything that appears to be unsupportive of the Malay language, you're going to be hammered.

I used to be a very strong proponent of the Malay language - I wrote in 1947 about the importance of Malay for the country. But acquiring knowledge is even more important. And when you want to acquire knowledge, you need to have mastery of other languages.

Question: Was the introduction of English for the teaching of Maths and

Science (PPSMI) partly an attempt to lure the Chinese community back to national schools? Would that have worked?

Answer: That may happen. But more importantly, the teaching of science and maths is not like the teaching of (subjects like) geography or history, which do not change much. Science changes every day. Every day, people are doing research and discovering new things and proposing new ideas, new technologies, everything is being renewed almost every day.

And if you don't understand the language (of Science), you cannot acquire that knowledge. If you cannot acquire the knowledge of science, then you are backwards. You may be able to speak Malay well, but you are backwards. And I think we would be regressing.

As for Mathematics, today's mathematics is very advanced. Without mathematical knowledge, you cannot calculate many things, even binary systems require mathematical knowledge. If you want to send a rocket to the moon, you must calculate the trajectory and that requires sophisticated knowledge of mathematics, which is not in the Malay language.

(By) not wanting to learn Maths and Science in English, we are cutting ourselves from modern knowledge and we would be going backwards.

Question: Lim Kit Siang has been a permanent feature of Malaysian politics. With DAP's capture of Penang, he has now had an opportunity to help the economic development of Penang. How much do you feel he has accomplished as a nation builder?

Answer: I think development requires certain skills and a certain drive. But when you are deflected by politics, by the need for you to stay popular with certain segments of the people, then you cannot focus on development... especially development that may benefit not only yourself but the people who are opposed to you.

Question: After the shock election results of 2008, Perkasa popped up and has been very active within the political sphere. The Chinese community, however, has taken a rather dim view of Perkasa. Do you see Perkasa as a temporary phenomenon? If BN wins big, do you see Perkasa retreating to the background?

Answer: After 2008, there were hundreds of Malay NGOs but Perkasa is the most vocal and the biggest. We cannot reject them as being non-Umno. We have to work with them. Otherwise, Umno will be a tiny organisation quite unable to get either Chinese support or Malay support. I don't know what would be their role after that (May 5 elections). But Perkasa, during elections, supports the BN, not just Umno. They support the Chinese and Indians in the BN. That, it makes clear. It doesn't support the extremists coming from the opposition party.

Question: Coming back to the issue of education, it seems as if the Malay language has been corrupted beyond belief. English is being introduced willy-nilly as Malay words. For example, the term Chief inspector is now cif inspektor.

Answer: Yes, the Malay language is absorbing a lot of foreign words - this is historical. If you study the Malay language and its development, you will find that it has been absorbing foreign words all along. Many words are not available in Malay - they can coin new words, or they have to adopt new words. They've adopted Sanskrit, Persian and other languages, especially Arabic.

Now of course, they're adopting English. But the sad thing is, even when there is a Malay word for it, they prefer the English word. And then at the same time, with these English words, they condemn the use of English (in schools).

Question: You can now learn English by learning Malay...

Answer: (laughs) The words are there but the composition is all wrong. For example, I had someone tell me once, that so-and-so "should go for a urine." I couldn't understand, what does he mean by 'go for a urine'? What he meant was 'go for a urine test' (laughs) but he left out the word test. Kena pi urine, la.

Question: You've always spoken of your support for Chinese businesses and their entrepreneurial zeal, how their hardworking culture helped Malaysia grow. Do you think that we are not seeing the full potential of Chinese community given the nature of the education system?

Answer: Actually, if you make a comparison, many would say that the NEP stands in the way of the development of the economy. It's true. If there is no NEP, this country would probably develop much faster. But it would be very unstable, because it would mean that (differences between) the rich and the poor is accentuated by the differences in race. The Chinese would be rich, and the Malays would be poor. And that would lead to instability.

It can work in Singapore, because Malays are only 15 per cent of the population. But here, Malays make up 60 per cent.

(The Chinese) are very dynamic. Left to themselves, they would probably grow this country much faster. But it would be an unhealthy growth.

As far as 'potential' is concerned though, I think they have been able to harness the maximum potential within the context of the need for us to distribute wealth fairly. Not equally, but fairly.

Question: Your thoughts on Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim are well documented. But we'd like to revisit events in 1998 - were you under the impression that he would go away and not chosen to fight?

Answer: Many people have been expelled from Umno and they go away quietly. Even myself, I was expelled for a time. I did not go against the party, I still supported the party from the outside. But Anwar is different.

Anwar is not Umno, really. He came to Umno because if he joined Pas, he would never have a chance to become prime minister. He joined Umno because he knew that if he could climb up the leadership ladder, that he would become PM one day.

The only thing was that he expected this to be accomplished in ten years, because normally, PMs don't stay very long. Apart from Tunku who stayed 13 years, all the rest had less than six years.

So he thought that I would stay for at the most 10 years. He would come up to become deputy PM, and deputy president of the party and then after 10 years, I would step down and he would become PM.

But as events turned out, I stayed on until very late. Up to 1998 - that's almost 17 years. That was very long and he had become impatient. But he would still have had a

chance. The main reason he lost the chance was because of moral character. That, I could not accept.

He lost his chance and he became very bitter, of course. His strategy through Umno failed, now what could he do? He must gather strength. He went to DAP and PAS and persuaded them that if they did not work together, they were going to lose elections. "We work together, form a kind of coalition and support each other, then we can win elections". So again, he's trying to find another route to PM. His main obsession is to become PM.

Question: Your judgment of Anwar then was grounded more on his moral character or his handling of the economy as Finance Minister at the time?

Answer: Yes, he appeared unable to manage the economy. But even then, I wasn't really bothered because I was expecting him to take over from me. When he went around meeting Umno divisions, becoming friendly with schoolteachers' unions, even when I heard stories about how he tried to denigrate me by saying that I practiced cronyism - that didn't matter to me because I was going to step down anyway. But his moral defect... it's something I could not accept.

He's a very smart man, very charismatic, able to get around people. He can be friendly with the Jews, and at the same time give the image of a Muslim zealot, and yet be acceptable to European liberals. He's a fantastic man, a fantastic man.

In a way, he's a chameleon. His colours turn to suit the environment he's in.

Tomorrow: Dr Mahathir's assessment of Datuk Seri Najib Razak's first four years as prime minister.

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