

After 50 years, time to think as Malaysians first, says Nazri
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BY SHERIDAN MAHAVERA

Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz believes that his contributions to Malaysia pale in comparison to that of Datuk Nicol David or Datuk Lee Chong Wei, who both wield racquets in the country's name.

"I am nothing compared to Nicol's contributions. She has done so much for Malaysia on the world stage," the Umno veteran and Tourism and Culture Minister tells The Malaysian Insider.

Yet the pride that he expresses towards the world squash champion and badminton ace is tempered with pain when he thinks of how some Malay-Muslims feel towards people like Nicol and Lim.

"When they go overseas they fight for Malaysia. Not for China or India. Yet when they come back, there are people who say their community has got no place in this country.

"That is unacceptable," he stresses with a shake of the head.

"For the first 50 years we can excuse ourselves for tolerating each other's racial and religious differences. But now we have to start accepting that we are all different and think of ourselves as Malaysians first."

This is the primary reason newsrooms across Malaysia, particularly in the English media like Nazri, who turns 59 this year.

In a political party that is supposed to be the compass of the federal government but whose leaders often play and rely on the race card, Nazri is a symbol and a beacon.

The English media relies on him to be a balm of rationality and tolerance whenever a fiery rash of extremism suddenly infect Umno members and the Malay supremacist fringe.

Nazri believes we should start thinking of ourselves as Malaysians first. The Malaysian Insider pic by Nazir Sufari, September 12, 2013. Nazri believes we should start thinking of ourselves as Malaysians first. The Malaysian Insider pic by Nazir Sufari, September 12, 2013. Due to his seniority in Umno and a provocative stint as a law and parliament minister, he is seen as a symbol that all is not lost with Umno — as far as ethnic and religious relations are concerned.

He is in fact, one of the few senior Umno leaders to have declared that he is "Malaysian first".

Yet as we sat down to interview him on what he thought about Malaysia turning 50, it became very apparent that this special quality of his does not bode well for Malaysia.

A Hobson's choice

Nazri credits his upbringing and his father, Tan Sri Abdul Aziz Yeop, for his broad-minded views of other communities.

His father's last post was as Education Ministry permanent secretary in the then-British colonial administration. Nazri attended English-medium schools whose student population was multi-ethnic.

Both father and son had many non-Malay friends.

He also stresses that his beliefs are not because he's trying to appease his supporters at home.

"People cannot say that I can afford to be liberal because my constituency is mixed. My constituency is in fact 76% Malay. And they are the rural, conservative Malays. But I am still liberal," says Nazri.

It boils down to leadership he says, and a mountain of self-confidence (that he admits with a smile, have also gotten him into trouble).

"If you don't have this then you run into your cocoon once there's trouble. The Malays will run back to their Malay community, the Chinese and the Indians will run back to their communities."

It's not been easy he says repeatedly throughout the interview, of the need to press on with the struggle to get Malaysians to think of themselves as Malaysians first.

"But we have no choice. We have no choice. We have to compromise and accept our differences. Whether you like it or not, you have to proceed.

"There's no question of sending non-Malays back to wherever they came from."

Since they were all born here?

"Yes. You can't partition the country (into ethnic enclaves). This is our country together."

Nazri's choice

Nazri's views on race match his belief in embracing the democratic process. Again, he is one of the few Umno leaders who has a healthy relationship with Pakatan Rakyat and non-Barisan Nasional parties.

"This is a democracy. You cannot say you cannot stand their presence and call them subversive or anti-Malaysian. They were also elected by the people. If I want them to respect me because I was elected by the people, I must also respect them."

Which brings us to the difficult fact about Nazri — he is special because he is a rarity in Umno. But that rarity means that he and the other handful of Umno progressives are a fringe element in the party.

His views are not mainstream. And it is the conservative, reactionary mainstream that is in control of the party and is able to steer the country by their position in the Barisan Nasional administration.

Nazri admits this and as a solution he presents... Khairy Jamaluddin.

The 37-year-old Youth and Sports Minister, Nazri says will have to shoulder the difficult task of changing the present Melayu-first mindset in Umno into one that is Malaysian-first.

"I hope that Khairy one day becomes PM. He is rational, not extremist... I share his values and he is fair to Malaysians regardless of race and religion."

It's a tricky solution since it puts the burden of change onto one man. Just like how Nazri has been relied on to be the bulwark against Malay-Muslim extremism. "Yes he is one man. But he has the time. If he wins uncontested as Umno Youth chief I think he can set the course and bring Umno Youth members to his way of thinking."

For in the face of stiff competition from Pakatan's young leaders and their Malaysian-first agenda, an Umno progressive like Nazri has very little choice.

He must put his hopes on another progressives like him if he wants to see Umno continue to be relevant.

"I believe (his and Khairy's) values will prevail eventually. We have no choice but to go the same path. The other path is headed towards disaster." — September 12, 2013.

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