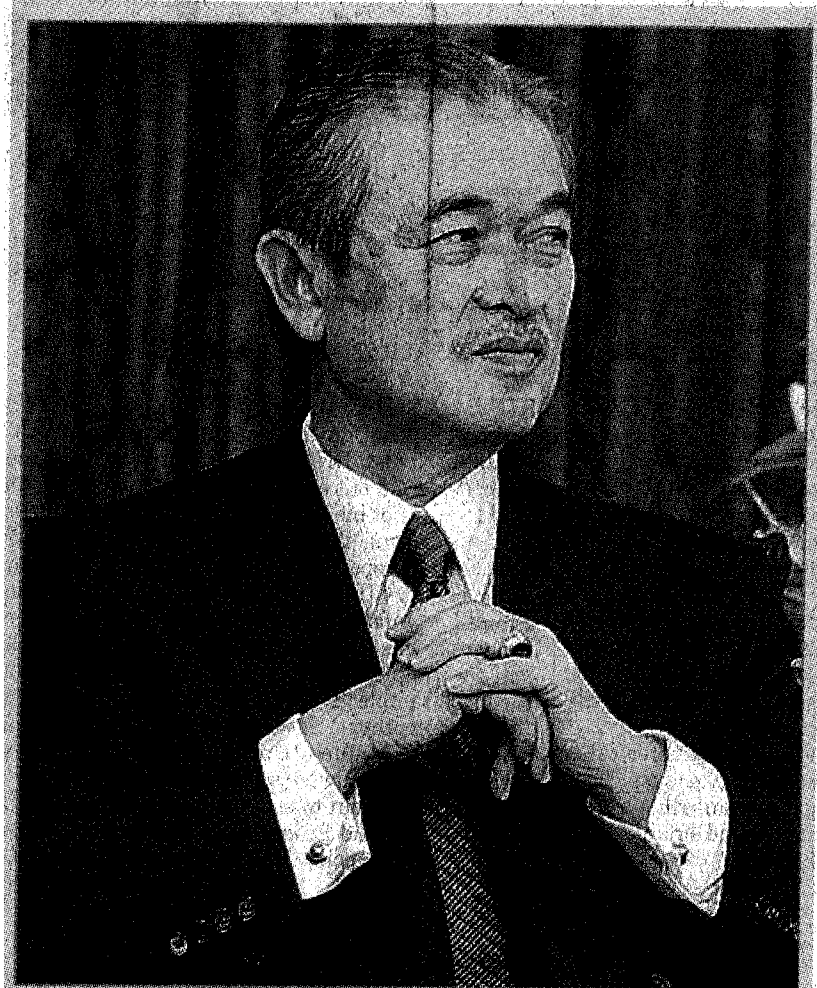


A culture of high performance

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“ We have to change our mindset and attitude to enable us to work harder and we must work with the objective of achieving excellence’



Excerpts of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's interview over RTM 1 last night

The PM was interviewed in Putrajaya by Berita Harian group editor Hishamuddin Aun and Bernama news editor Ahmad Zukiman Zain, with Datuk Johan Jaaffar as moderator

Q: With the huge mandate (in the March general election) and such a high level of support, does this mean that the Government that you lead will be much more prepared to listen and give room for differences in opinion?

A: I take it that such a huge mandate means higher expectations and probably, giving rise to impatience. Everyone wants to see everything being done in big volumes and done very fast. And taking into account the manifesto presented to the people during the election. I fully understand this. And so the thing that needs to be done as soon as I formed the new Government is how to implement it. But before that, when I was already the Prime Minister, as soon as (Tun) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) handed over power to me, I had started to think about this.

What kind of ideas that need to be introduced, what kind of approach that needs to be introduced at that time, just like the approach that I spoke about at that time, which is we want to co-operate even after our victory. I said work with me and not for me.

All this is testing ground before the election to see what kind of approach is acceptable to the people, not just to make them happy but an approach that is realistic, that can bring about changes that we desire because I hold to the philosophy that the success of the Government must mean the success where the people are involved in. The people play an important part to co-operate and to help. And in the manifesto, I said this: to empower the people, the empowerment of the people. With that, the Government and the party will feel energised due to the people's support.

Secondly, I know that I inherited a big success, a national development that before me was headed by Dr Mahathir. My stand is that whatever I inherit should be maintained so as not to be anything lesser, and one that does not shrink. But at the same time I need to ensure that what needs to be done is to find new targets and strive to achieve a better future.

I look at Vision 2020 not at the same level but something that is already more advanced. I look at Vision 2020 as a target that is well ahead and above us. This means that I have to strive to find an approach that will enable the people and the nation to achieve something which we hope will be even better. So from these approaches that I inherited I have to work so that we become better, we will improve on our achievements and then those ideas that I have come out with before the manifesto was written receive positive reaction in that we must change our mindset and attitude. We have to change our mindset and attitude to enable us to work harder and we must work with the objective of achieving excellence. We must embrace a culture of high performance, nothing less.

With that we must achieve excellence but excellence alone is not good enough. Among those who are excellent, we want to achieve glory and with glory, we must achieve distinction. If this is our attitude and if we are steadfast in our determination for high performance whether they are students, entrepreneurs, traders, teachers, academicians, or administrators. No matter who they are, if everyone wants to be successful, I believe some of the objectives of Vision 2020 can be achieved earlier than the year 2020.

market share. We can't run away from this so we have to equip ourselves to get that competitive edge.

The question is how to enable the people, the Government, for example, and the private sector to do so. We want them to hold fast to good governance. All must have integrity, all must be clean, all must be efficient for us to eradicate corruption. We must also minimise bureaucracy and red-tape that slows us down must be swept aside. So other projects we will have to introduce one by one and in this situation, I hope we will bring about big changes to our mindset, attitude and the way we work. With this, we introduce projects one by one, God willing, and it will bring us success.

Q: Eight months is actually a short time. Are you satisfied with what you achieved or what have you expected to achieve during this period?

A: The biggest thing that happened during these eight months and which has given me a great awareness is the result of the general election. This means the response from the people. And from the people's response, I have already begun to understand that the people are demanding and expecting something. It becomes a pressure. But there are things that we cannot implement quickly. If there is pressure, there is a good feeling, yes, it forces us to work. But to implement all these will take time.

I have already started what we should achieve later whether it has to do with fighting corruption, enhancing efficiency or reducing bureaucracy. Whether through building up integrity, good governance, transparency, disclosure, these are being done by the private sector. But what we started today or in the past three months may not show obvious results yet.

If let's say we are talking about district offices, we have actually reduced their backlog, especially in the issuance of land titles which previously ran into thousands. Some 63 per cent had been cleared. There are also improvements in counter services. But what I want is for these improvements to be clear for everyone to see.

For the police, certainly the big job was the creation of the Royal Commission and I really hope that this commission can come out with concrete recommendations. Efforts now are focused on intensifying modern agricultural development. This has also started. In education, we have also started. It's set. People say if we want to run, whether we want to run 100 yards or a marathon, we have blown the whistle. But one thing I am happy with is that with the budget in deficit, we are able to contain the deficit to prevent it from widening. If the deficit widens, everybody will be worried and it might mean the country's rating will come down. If it comes down then investment won't come and business will be dampened. I have already said that we are going to be cautious and prudent so that we can contain the deficit.

We do it progressively, we cut and at the same time we have to spend too. This is a must. And to do this takes time because we have to rearrange, we have to relook at how to do it. There are those who got LOI (Letter of Invitation) but suddenly are not called. Is it because of bankruptcy that those who already got the Letter of Award (LOA) can't even start work? I hear so many stories. It's okay. They are patient. I announced that RM8.5 billion worth of high-priority projects will be speedily implemented and with the money that we have, thank God, we are able to implement them and our deficit is not worrying. And at this time I can say there is still the good feeling. That's why our economy in the first quarter was at 7.6 per cent and for the second quarter there is still hope to achieve more than seven per cent, God willing.

Q: There are people who are asking whether the Government still has money?

A: There is money but we have to be prudent in our spending.

Q: In the general election, one factor was obvious, and that was the feel-good feeling, and you just mentioned the challenges that have to be faced. What is the Government's next step?

A: I indicated earlier we have started several programmes and this will continue for a long time. If we mention that we want to improve the efficiency of the administration, it is not only in the procedural aspects that we need to improve on.

Workers have to be given retraining to keep abreast of new policies that we implemented and which they must understand. And in education too, we want to have smart schools, we have to build them. There is no money to build all these and it will take a long time. So I say we don't have to try to build more ... with the large allocation set aside to build smart schools, we can provide the infrastructure and information communications technology (ICT) facilities, and convert the existing schools into smart schools. This is one example.

And the decisions made during the era of Dr Mahathir have to be implemented. It will take time to implement all these. We don't want to neglect them. Besides, we want to improve the curriculum.

In the agriculture sector, we have also started. Earlier, when I started to talk about agriculture, people said why is Pak Lah talking about agriculture?

Why choose agriculture? We talk about the industrial sector, the manufacturing sector but now we are talking about the old sector, a sector which is not competitive enough. That is wrong.

That view is now a big mistake. Now we have technology, biotechnology which can be combined with ICT, which can be combined with the mechanisation programme. With that we can use machines in the plantations, and then we can produce better agriculture produce, better

quality products that will possibly bring success to the small and medium industries all together.

Q: But it looks like only a revolution in the agriculture sector can change the farming style in the country?

A: I have foreseen it will become like this. I think there are several factors. The agriculture sector has the potential to create new sources of income, increase earnings and wealth.

Secondly, with the agro-based industrialisation programme to create small and medium enterprises, what does it mean? It means there is increased income, it means there is new wealth and what is more important to me is the rural people who are involved in agriculture are being brought into the small and medium industry sector.

Another thing is that in the context of increasing the number of Malays and Bumiputeras in trade and industry. Recently I opened an Agri-Bazaar where there was a demonstration by a woman entrepreneur making tapioca crackers. After being taught the proper ways of packaging, the product looked neat, clean, attractive and the quality of the crackers was also good. She was also taught the marketing of products through computers and she even had a webpage.

She showed me a list of department stores and supermarkets which are her clients. They already know her and they order straight from her. So I was told by Tan Sri Muhyiddin (Yassin) that her sales have reached RM1 million.

So with computers, other methods and then with biotechnology one can make better quality tapioca products and derive higher income.

The Agro-Bazaar has 800 people and if this increases then we can expect the rural areas to modernise. This is modernisation of the rural sector through modernisation of agriculture.

Q: The weakest link in the agriculture sector is marketing. This is one area which needs to be tackled to enable our farmers to earn a better income.

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Q: The weakest link in the agriculture sector is marketing. This is one area which needs to be tackled to enable our farmers to earn a better income.

A: Today we have started to empower, increase the efforts of those in the rural areas. But this matter is for all, not only for the Malays, but to all the people irrespective of their race and their religion.

But as we know, rural areas are mostly Malay, and many Bumiputeras are involved in the agriculture sector which we are trying to modernise.

Q: You are passionate about issues relating to the people at large, and I wish to relate the efforts taken to improve the ability and the strength of the Malays. Are you satisfied with the achievements of the Malays after the New Economic Policy, for instance at this stage?

A: At this stage we have made achievements. Those days, people said we couldn't see a Bumiputera business and entrepreneur community, now these groups have emerged. The question is how to equip them so that they will be much stronger and more competitive, and it is important they compete without the "crutches" forever. Last time I told them to throw away the crutches, meaning they cannot be helped forever. They are capable. And today there are Bumiputera companies which do not need assistance. We want to enlarge this group.

I am not saying that the specific rights given to Bumiputera based on policies which we have implemented and still implementing, I am not saying throw, throw, throw and discard.

No. Still they can be used but besides that, we want these capable groups to strive, the able ones to succeed further, try to be on your own.

Make sure you can try yourself. This is what I want most. We have reached a stage where we want to increase the Malay community involved in business — more self-made businessmen and entrepreneurs, not increase the number of commission agents only.

Commission agents, so to speak, are not businessmen, not entrepreneurs because they only find, help and make a project successful until the tender stage, then there is commission.

This is also a business, I am not saying this is not a business, I am not saying this is not a good business but we do not want to create a Malay community which does business by taking commissions only

We want them to be solid businessmen, one that is built on entrepreneurship. That will last better, they will not rely on other people. Don't depend on other people.

If other people do not do business then they will not get the commission. That is the direction which we are going. God willing, we can see real, solid, very entrepreneurial Malays, Malays who are entrepreneurs in spirit.

Because many of them are involved in agriculture.

Q: We talk about Bumiputera economic strength, we must accept the fact that the total equity market has not reached a remarkable level compared to other races. Do you feel this Malay agenda needs to be continued? And what policy statement will you make on this matter?

A: There are other things which I want to implement to help what is called the Malay economy. Actually, it need not be called Malay economy and non-Malay economy because Malay Bumiputera is the group in which the agenda to restructure society under the New Economic Policy has not been achieved due to changing circumstances.

Since the 70s until today, many economic crises took place including the currency crisis. The currency crisis has reduced the percentage of Bumiputera participation in the business sector. The number of Bumiputera companies has shrunk, the percentage dropped. So we have to strive harder. To me obviously we say strengthening the Bumiputera position will be done. Now we see industries in villages and those related to carpentry and handicraft. Now I see batik has potential. Although batik is not my effort, it is my wife Endon's effort.

Now I see batik (industry) has produced many successful Bumiputeras.

How to give more value, how to compete in the markets. That is why Malaysian batik is not only for our local markets. It should be made an international brand which can be called ethnic product that is popular in the international market, like ethnic fashion, fabric and others. Batik is actually us.

Q: Umno divisions began their meetings today. What are your hopes and advice to party members?

A: I hope the party elections will proceed smoothly. We want Umno to be strong and united. We've just held the general election. To implement what we have promised the people in the election, we need strength, a strong Government supported by the party's strength. If we have problems in the party, arguments in party elections, this will weaken us, weaken the party, weaken the Government. If Umno is weak, it can also weaken Barisan Nasional (BN). Hence, surely the people will be disappointed. I'm confused (people say), we give you the mandate, a bigger mandate, but you forget to give attention to the country. What is happening? People are waiting. With such a big mandate, is Umno working (or) doesn't it want to shoulder the responsibilities? Some people will talk like that, asking "Pak Lah, what's happening?"

I say party elections should go on, they cannot be postponed or cancelled. Only, I hope, follow procedures, conduct the meetings well, follow our constitution so that there'll be no trouble, no fights. Let's not, after the party contests, after party elections are over, everything is over... the ugly effect of the elections, we quarrel again.

What I worry about are the SMS, poison-pen letters, e-mails and all sorts of things, concocting endless stories, fictitious tales merely to win the election, hurling all sorts of accusations. These are not good. If this is slander, everything will be spoilt. This is not good. If corruption is not condoned but politicking permits such things, character assassination, slander, concocting stories merely to topple the people considered to be enemies, eventually nothing good will be achieved.

Q: Looking back at the 252 days that you have been Prime Minister, are there moments that you are happiest with?

A: Happiest moments ... I don't know what are the happiest moments. I am always happy.

Q: Probably the huge victory in the general election?

A: Probably the big win was a happy moment for me, to recapture Terengganu. I didn't expect ... When I was in the car, someone phoned to say, "Pak Lah, Terengganu has been recaptured". I said "Thank God, Oh God, we have won", I didn't realise I shed tears. Endon said, "Eh, you're crying". Tears dropped without me realising it.

Q: During the election, you said that BN elected representatives would be asked to submit a quarterly report. Are you now expecting them to do so?

A: There are those who sent such a report to my office, others through the office of the Chief Secretary to the Government. There are also those who ask for some more time, to get more details. It's okay. If anything, it's for the good of all. — Bernama

Q: You made two major announcements that should make many happy. One, to increase the development expenditure under the Eighth Malaysia Plan. The latest, yesterday you announced projects worth RM8.5 billion. There are two questions. Firstly, we still hear complaints, especially from Bumiputera contractors who say payments are still late. Secondly, contracts are not as many as before. There is one group which sees you as often making big announcements as though you are taking the populist approach. How are you going to counter such a perception?

A: Well, this is what people say. If you take the populist approach, he has no intention to spend, to work, this is not the approach. Forever, I will not agree with the populist approach. But if I announce something that I want to do because people feel happy about it and the programme becomes a popular programme, it's not me who becomes popular. That's what I want most. Also, in this matter, the Malay Chamber of Commerce of Malaysia president Datuk Rahman Mydin told me recently that a RM120 million bill has not been paid yet. Why has this happened?

Why was I not told about it? I won't know if I'm not told. I straight away spoke to Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop (Second Finance Minister). I said, tell me the ministry responsible. He told me the ministry responsible. I asked why this happened? Do they face shortage of funds? Nevertheless, I said you pay first from the Treasury.

Later, we'll talk to the ministry. Don't try to settle with the ministry and delay payment. Three days later, he said everything had been paid. The ministry concerned had paid ... should be alright.

Q: But can the Prime Minister afford to make such a decision everytime?

A: That has become micro management.

If micro management is to manage everything, it's impossible. We want to carry out agriculture projects for Bumiputeras.

Bumiputeras will play a big role.