

HEARING IT ALL

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There were no out-of-bound areas during the interview with Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on TV3 last night. Among the issues the Prime Minister tackled were: the future of Proton, allegations he favoured his family and that contracts under the Ninth Malaysia Plan had been given to cronies. Below are excerpts from the interview by Bernama chairman DATUK MOHD ANNUAR ZAINI.

On the Ninth Malaysia Plan

Q: People viewed you as too cautious with spending and then suddenly there was a big announcement that RM15 billion is going to be spent on 9MP projects.

A: The money is there and we will spend the money. When I took over, the deficit was quite high and if we had ignored it, it could have brought about negative effects.

So at that time, attention was given to matters relating to the deficit. But we have succeeded... I have managed to reduce the deficit. From year to year, we have reduced it. Now that everything is under control, and the deficit has been reduced, we are ready to spend.

Q: The RM15 billion quantum is one thing, but the problem being noticed is the distribution of contracts by the Government. Is there a proper mechanism?

A: Through tenders, all will have the opportunity to get contracts.

Q: There is talk that this RM15 billion spending is just talk and just an announcement but the people who are supposed to get the projects have already been determined.

A: That kind of talk is not true at all. As if I want to cheat the people. This is slander. Whoever wants to make this allegation should write it down. Be brave. I want these people to prove it and provide the information. If they cannot prove it, they will have to face the consequences.

On his image

Q: Before you became the PM, the image of you was that of a clean politician. Now you are being attacked. How can this happen?

A: The person may have reasons why he wants to make such allegations against me. Maybe he has a certain agenda. But if he accuses me of being corrupt, write it down, just say it openly. Don't talk behind my back. It means he is not honest.

On style of governing

Q: People say that you are too careful, too cautious to the extent that approvals

for important matters are postponed, particularly development projects.

A: If the matter is important, we must take time to think. I have been the PM for two-and-a-half years. I know people say the PM has a lot of power. But I must be careful in this matter. I don't have that much experience.

Another thing I know since becoming the PM is that whatever I do, good or bad, it's the people that will be affected. If it's wrong, it will be bad. If it's good, *Alhamdulillah*. But what I'm worried about is, if it's wrong, many will suffer.

Q: But there are people who say that you are too gentle... If we take the Machiavellian concept, a good leader must be popular and feared. But if there's only one choice, he should be feared.

A: I prefer the people who elected me to respect me. I don't believe, as a Muslim, that the Machiavellian approach should be practised. Must not be practised. We can't, for whatever reason, legitimise something to get what we want. I don't hold to that philosophy.

Q: But the people compare you with Lee Kuan Yew and the PM before you. They say that you are too gentle and that, among other factors, makes the Government slow.

A: This is not about being gentle, or being hard. It is about being firm, on what we think is fair, on what is true, what is good. What is important to me... first, truth and justice. If what is done is true and fair, then there is firmness in that decision. No need to be gung-ho. Just do it. No need to show off, that's my style.

On Malaysian firms being 'colonised'

Q: Today, one of the most sensitive issues concerns the involvement of Singaporean companies.

A: Firstly, what is wrong with foreign companies buying shares in our companies. This should be seen as a positive way as it shows that they have confidence in our companies.

But the most important point here is that we want to protect our interests in the local companies. We cannot allow our control of the companies to be taken over. There is no Malaysian company which is controlled by a foreign company.

We allow foreign companies, be it from the United States, Korea or Japan, to buy the shares in Malaysian companies. But

the case now is that when someone mentions Singapore, there are many who get angry. I do not know why, but we have to ask them.

On Proton

Q: There are concerns that during your era, Proton is not getting much attention from you.

A: I know Proton is a company with national interest and is the pride of Malaysians. I will surely not allow Proton to fall. I will do whatever it takes to help Proton. Furthermore, Proton has a lot of vendors relying on it... if Proton falls, then the vendors will follow suit.

Q: Does this include the review of the National Automotive Policy?

A: Yes... If there are reasons for the National Automotive Policy to be reviewed, we will not have any problem to make the necessary improvements. To me, this has never been the problem. If there is something wrong, we have to make it right immediately.

On Tun Dr Mahathir

Q: People are asking why you choose to remain silent

A: I opted to remain silent as I did not want

to argue with Tun in the newspapers. Tun himself said in a statement that he was not getting the information that he wants. He was hoping to get the details.

If that is the case, the ministers should be allowed to explain to the people on matters concerning their ministries. The people want to know what is happening. This is what is being done, and the ministers prefer that I do not speak, and there are many who feel that it is better for me to remain silent. There are many people who have said that it is better if I do not speak or things will get out of hand.

Q: But there are questions directed at Datuk Seri and your family members and it cannot be answered by anyone else.

A: I do not like to reply on matters concerning my family. I know my children are not guilty of the allegations made against them by certain quarters. My children are not involved in any companies or concessions given by the Government or rely on the Government to bail them out. They do not ask this and that from the Government. They do their own business.

Q: The perception, if not clarified, will be a big issue.

A: Just give me time... if I take the field in a football game, and after 10 minutes, I am judged for my performance, how can that be? You have to wait for me to warm up, to pick up the tempo and to move around. It is difficult... my way is not like Tun. Tun Mahathir had things done in his own way, but I have not strayed from the aim. The aim that I know is to lead the country to achieve Vision 2020. And I will do this my way.

FROM PAK LAH

On son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin

Q: There are those who believe the people around you are influential. I'm talking about Khairy Jamaluddin, your son-in-law.

A: It's like this... Khairy used to work for me. As an officer he has a role. All officers have their roles, to prepare reports and to offer opinions. Whether I accept or not their views, that's my decision.

Secondly, when a story emerged about a very powerful and influential 28-year-old man, he quit his job. He didn't want to work with me any more. And he survived. He bought shares to become a partner in ECM Libra, and I know he took a loan for it. But to say that he stole a project, there is no proof that Khairy took a government project, no such proof.

Q: Is it a heavy burden for you because he also happens to be a family member and has political influence in Umno?

A: I still remember, and I'm saying this openly, I don't know if Datuk Hishammuddin will get angry with me... Hisham said "Pemuda have decided, I have decided, it's him. I (Hisham) want to propose Khairy as Umno Youth deputy chief. Pak Lah, you don't disturb me. Pak Lah, don't disturb us, this is a matter for Umno Youth. Umno Youth will choose who we want to choose, Pak Lah don't disturb us. We want him".

He is now the Umno Youth deputy chief, so he has to work. Whatever influence he has in Umno Youth, it depends on what he can do, what he is doing, what he's working on.

People want to know how far he could go. At the first hurdle, he was booted. But in the last Umno general assembly, he was praised for delivering Umno Youth's proposal on the economy.

Q: What about the principle of separating family connections?

A: Firstly, I see him as an office bearer representing Umno Youth. He was present at some meetings and



he spoke in his capacity as an Umno Youth representative.

If it's about business...never for once has Khairy come to see me personally to ask...to say this is my project, this is your project, I want you to approve. None. He knows I will never give it to him.

Q: Is there a possibility of him being used by interested parties?

A: Maybe. Maybe there are people who want to use him. These people will look for everyone to use. They will look for the son, for the son-in-law, for the wife, everyone. They will look for your best friends, look for your schoolmates, look for the kampung people that I know. In Kepala Batas, all kinds of people have gone down there. But what is important here is that I'm the one who will make the decision. Many people are angry at me...(They say) what is this, we don't get anything, Pak Lah has become the PM for so long but I haven't got anything. There are also those who got what they wanted, but they keep quiet. Those who didn't get will complain endlessly. But we have to be fair.

I am responsible for the decisions I make. People say that I am doing all these because of Khairy. After struggling in politics for years and having climbed the mountain to become Prime Minister, can I simply hand over the power to him. How can I do this?

On helping all Malaysians

Q: There are some who say that priority should be given to the Malays?

A: We want to strike a balance. We want to eradicate poverty. This is done across the board without looking at the race. We want to eradicate hardcore poverty by 2010, regardless of the race. This is for sure. This policy has never changed but the fact is that there are many poor people who are Malays. So when there are many Malays, it seems like we are concentrating on only one race and we are neglecting the Indians, which has been brought to my attention by Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

I have allocated funds for a special programme to help the Indians who are facing numerous problems. I strongly hold to the strategy that any development should benefit all Malaysians. We cannot run away from this.

I am the BN chairman and the Prime Minister of the BN Government. Those who support me are from all races. So when I go up, don't tell me that I will only help one group.

There must be fairness, and I hold to this. God wants us to be fair.

On son Kamaluddin

Q: There is talk that Kamaluddin has abused his relationship with you

A: Kamal (Kamaluddin) has not abused his ties with me. Kamal does his business in one area, which is in the field of integrated oil. The fact is that there are two companies in the world which is involved in this area, one is in the United States and the other belongs to Kamal. He is not involved in any other company.

If people ask him why he does his business overseas, he will say that since his father is the Prime Minister, it is difficult for him to do business here. Eighty per cent of his business and contracts are overseas.

He is also involved in Petronas' international open tenders and he normally gets them, not without facing stiff competition from other companies. But compared to what he gets overseas, the business from Petronas is still considered small. He also gets tenders from Shell, Mobil and Esso, this is his area as his business is in the oil and gas industry. Kamal has not been involved in local companies or got any local concessions. He has not even asked any aid from the Government, he has never asked for the Government to bail him out... nothing.



Q: There is word going around that the monorail project in Penang has been reserved for Kamal?

A: What is this.... who said it? I'll tell you Annuar, it's hard to be nice you know...

Q: Maybe it is time for you not to be too good, gentle?

A: I am also worried, if I cross the line, then I will be in trouble.