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Why are you so concerned about two-thirds?"

I told them that Malaysians are Malaysians, they like to have the portion that they always had. Whether they are hungry or not, it does not matter, they always want to have the portion they are used to.

Q: It has been said that there has been a greater degree of freedom in the country as part of your administrative reform. Some people have even blamed your openness as a cause for your downfall.

A: People have their own views but let's be realistic about this. In this era, where people have access to information through so many different sources, the logic is to embrace openness. You don't muzzle the press. If certain newspapers were to have heavy censorship on one particular subject, people can still have access to information through other sources. So the newspapers are worried that they may be perceived as not telling the truth. So that's the kind of openness that you have to admit and accept (these days).

A new generation of young, well educated and better informed Malaysians has emerged. People are not stupid or ill-informed, so BN must learn to explain its policies better. The most important thing is recognising this development. I have always held this view that we must give more space and freedom for democratic discourse.

The problem in the past was that we (the government) had not been able to explain our policies to deal with the situation more effectively. It is a new situation for us, even for me. After we had allowed this freedom of openness, we have to cope with it. And the people had reacted to it in the most enthusiastic way, and they think that freedom means they can say anything they want. Like what is happening in the blogs. I am not saying that everyone is abusing it but I think the number or percentage of those who tend to abuse it or can abuse it is big enough to cause a lot of concern and problems.

Q: So, as a result, you still need laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act.

A: Well, I do need all those acts that we have.

Q: As a check and balance?

A: Yes, as a check and balance. But, of course, in implementing the acts, we have to be wise. It is not a set of laws to be exploited. We cannot abuse the laws we have. They are to curb things we ought not to do.

It is unacceptable to have complete freedom. We cannot allow people to spread lies and slander freely, which is sometimes the case with the alternative media. I just ask them to look at the environment objectively. I think there is more open criticism of the government now than ever.

We have bodies like Pemudah, where criticism of government machinery is expressed frankly to the faces of senior civil servants. And these criticisms are acted upon. I believe when people view the situa-

tion objectively, they will see that they have a lot more space for constructive discourse.

Q: So, in a nutshell, are you saying that the government ought to know how to grapple with this openness and freedom, which is really a global phenomenon?

A: In a way, it is a worldwide phenomenon. It is all because we have access to more information from all sorts of sources and the people are learning to communicate with one another in a different way, like SMS, YouTube or Facebook. The new communication technology has given us the freedom to disseminate and access information.

Q: Do you think you can achieve much over the next five months? What is your game plan? Are there other things on your mind for which you might want to lay the foundation for future generations?

A: I must remain focused in terms of what I want to achieve. We have done some work already but we do also have some problems in getting them off the ground. But then, it is not that we are starting from scratch.

I still have executive power until the day I decide to hand over responsibilities to my successor. What I am proposing is good and important for the country, so I believe the people who choose to obstruct progress would not be acting in the interest of the country or the people.

As I said, I want to get these reforms done, and if I need to bring other people in to help me accomplish them, I'll do it.

Institutional reforms, for some reason, do not interest many people, but I believe that this is a crucial area for Malaysia, especially if we aspire to be a mature, developed nation.

The perception towards our institutions has been eroded over time. It does not matter whether this perception is right or wrong. It is a negative perception and if it is not addressed, then it will harden into reality.

Once people lose their trust and confidence in institutions, the country cannot function properly. People must believe in the effectiveness of the judiciary and law-enforcement agencies. They must believe that the government is serious about fighting corruption. What I am trying to do is formalise these changes.

On the economic side, I have often said before that our growth and prosperity need to be shared more evenly on a number of levels — between communities, between the rich and poor, between regions. The social safety net must be broadened and improved to look after less fortunate Malaysians.

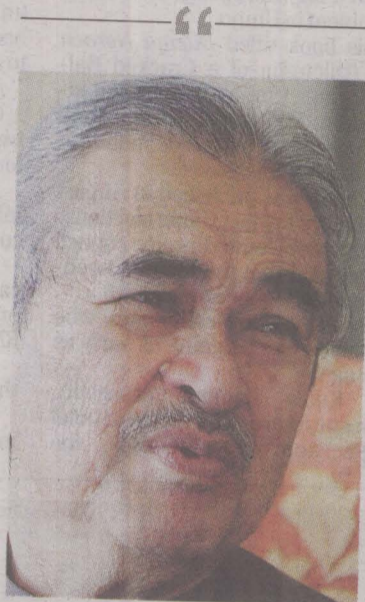
Our development corridor initiative is important because it allows quality opportunities to be distributed equitably throughout the country, instead of being concentrated solely in urban centres.

I know that people keep asking, "Where are the results?" but we should realise that these are long-term plans which will take a number of years to be fully

implemented.

Still, I realise that visible results are important, so I hope we can make some tangible progress within the next six months.

Q: Do you believe you can get the support of your cabinet for some of the reforms that you want to introduce?



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Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

A: People have different views. There will be differences of opinion, but *Insyaa-Allah* (God willing) I am confident that I can get the support. If not, I will have to find people who will support the changes that I am proposing.

Q: Can you get agreement from the opposition?

A: Why not? It is up to them. If they want to play politics, they may refrain from supporting them. They

may see that this is fun because if the government cannot fulfil its proposals, then it would become a point to throw into the face of the government in that we haven't done this or that. It will become an issue for their political campaigns, but will it be good for the rakyat? I don't think so.

If that is the approach that they are taking, I will be very sad. You are depriving the people of something that they (the people) want. But the opposition wants to do things their way. We have our way. But we are ready to hear what they want to say.

These proposals are good for the people. Both sides have to accept that they are not going to get everything, but we should reach enough points of agreement to pass the bills.

I don't think the opposition will block them just because of politics. If they did that, then they would be doing a disservice to the public.

I hope there are enough common areas. At least, we have done something. No law is cast in stone. We can still make amendments. Let us fight for the sake of the people. That also applies to the people in my government. If they are not going to help me to do this or oppose, I may have to get some other people.

Q: Meaning that there should be less politicking and more working for the people?

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: Some observers have stated that BN would have suffered an electoral setback, regardless of who was leading the party?

A: I don't know. I don't want to say anything, I have never thought about it. What we need to do now is not talk about what had happened or who is more well-placed to lead, but we have learnt the lessons from the experience of the last general election.

What we need to do when the next general election comes is to do better than we had done before. What is clear is that we should listen closely to what the people want and deliver it to them.

Q: What do you think BN needs to do to regain the trust and support of the public?

A: Our formula has worked for over 50 years, first as the Alliance and then as BN. To me, it is a good model, because it gives everyone a seat at the table.

The opposition has also formed an alliance, but I think it will be difficult to make that work because their ideologies are so different. But like all things, our formula needs to be revisited from time to time.

It is always complicated when you have such a big "family". Some people say Umno is too dominant. Some people in Umno think that others are demanding too many things. What is clear is that we need to have more clarity. We need to discuss how we can make our collaboration more effective.

That is why I have called for a BN convention early next year. It may not come up with all the answers, but it will certainly put us on the right path.

Q: On Wednesday, you mentioned the alarming deterioration of inter-racial and inter-religious relations. But you have been seen as back-tracking on inter-faith dialogue. What went wrong?

A: I have not really backed away from inter-faith dialogue. What I have said is that these sensitive discussions must be handled with care, perhaps behind closed doors, because it is such a volatile and emotional subject. Every time it is raised, there will be people who will feel threatened; they feel as if their rights and sensitivities will be trampled upon.

Q: What do you think are the key challenges facing your successor, Datuk Seri Najib Razak?

A: I think it is national unity. The state of inter-racial and inter-religious relations at the moment is not good. I think we have done well to thrive for this long, but we need to get back to basics and understand that Malaysia is stronger for the mix of different races and communities that we have.

Our racial and religious mix is a blessing, not a curse. Our assets should not be turned into negatives. We need to tackle these issues head-on, with honesty and understanding. After more than 50 years of independence, these issues still remain with us.

Every time a generation understands it, there comes a new generation that has to be educated and told about all this, how to live with one another without conflict. So public education on the subject of race relations and religious tolerance is something that they know.

It is like in a family. When the young generation is born, at some stage they have to be told about the family, what we stand for, what we'd like to see, how they should play their roles, how they should behave. It is all very important. So when every new generation comes, they have to be educated. This is an issue that will be with us for a very long time. This will be Najib's biggest challenge.

Externally, I think the economy will continue to be challenging. It is a reverse of 1998, because fundamentally, we are still strong. The problems are starting in the so-called developed markets this time. Still, their problems will affect us sooner or later. We have a very open economy. Total trade stands at over twice our GDP. I think we have managed our economy prudently and this has put us in a good position.

Q: What next after March? What do you most want to do once you have retired?

A: A holiday, perhaps. At the moment, I am concentrating on finishing what I need to do with the institutional reforms and economic initiatives. After that I'll have more time for my *cucu* (grandchildren) and things like golf and fishing.

Q: How would you like to be remembered?

A: I will leave that to the people to determine. I am just thankful that I have managed to serve my country for this long. — Bernama