

MALAM WARTAWAN 2009 : POLICY, POLITICS AND THE MEDIA - A NEW WAY FORWARD

By : YAB. DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB BIN TUN HAJI ABDUL RAZAK, PERDANA MENTERI MALAYSIA

Venue : HOTEL ISTANA, KUALA LUMPUR

Date : 06/04/2009

1. I want to thank you all for joining me today and for the work you do in providing a valuable service to the people of Malaysia. I would like to thank the former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for the smooth and elegant transition, a fine and unique tradition to be maintained now and the future.

2. As I outlined after being sworn in as Prime Minister, this smooth transition of leadership has presented a remarkable opportunity to renew our country for the new and challenging times ahead.

3. Our first priority will be to re-establish economic stability and emerge from the current global economic downturn stronger and with a long-term strategy for Malaysia's economy that can serve all of our people.

4. In recent days and weeks, we have announced an unprecedentedly large mini budget of RM60bn as a comprehensive response to cushion the effects from a sharp slowdown in the global economy. As one of the world's most open trading nations, we are vulnerable, but as a well diversified economy, we are in a position to take the necessary measures to avoid the worst of the global recession.

5. But I know, and people throughout the country know, that to achieve our country's long-term ambitions we need not only policy renewal, but political and institutional renewal.

6. This will be a core principle of my government; governing that reflects the best values, abilities and strengths of our people, our leaders and our nation.

7. As I said in my first hours as Prime Minister, we need to renew our democracy, ensuring that our institutions, our parties and our public servants are responsive to the needs of all the people; working for the public interest, not narrow opportunism or political interests.

8. And this is what I want to speak with you about today. Together, we must establish a new national discourse:

- o on the principles of transparency and accountability;
- o service to all, not just the few; and
- o respect and fairness in the public dialogue.

9. A constructive civilized consensus - across all people, races, parties and media - that engages the Nation in the political process.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

10. The starting point for any government that seeks to be more responsive to the needs of its people is its commitment to transparency and its dedication to getting results.

11. The launch of a website to monitor and provide data on the allocation of the two stimulus packages -- offers greater transparency of usage of government resources. I hope to do this very soon.

12. In any other business or profession, people are held accountable for their work every day.

- o The taxi driver who gets us to our destination.
- o The restaurant staff responsible for good service and great food, or
- o The assembly line worker making products to be exported around the world.

13. Just a few days ago, I visited Kampung Kerinchi, Petaling Street, and Brickfields to speak with Malaysians going about the everyday lives.

14. Their message to me about our political process was not one of despair or anger; rather they want to know that we are working hard on their behalf; that we are getting the job done and they want us held accountable when we don't.

15. They also want a change in the tone of our public discourse.

RESPECT AND FAIRNESS

16. For too long, the politics of accusation and rumor have trampled a political dialogue that is founded on respect and fairness.

17. We each have our own political philosophy and views on policies that we feel will best serve the nation. That debate must continue. Indeed, it must be a vigorous and informed debate.

18. In such a period of trial for economies around the world, ideas need to be tested, discussed, and argued because so much is at stake.

19. Dialogue that demonstrates respect for one another even when disagreements are deep, must take place in all parts of our country. In homes and in restaurants, in kampung and cities, in workplaces and friends' gatherings and in the traditional media and in the rapidly growing online media.

20. This is a leadership role we must play as adults, mentors, parents and teachers. We must teach and lead by example. So that the next generation of Malaysians values and respects diversity of people and opinion as the basis and enduring strength of our nation.

21. For my part, I have taken my message for One Malaysia directly to the people (via my 1 Malaysia website). Many of you have participated in that online dialogue and have expressed your concerns about this issue and our country.

22. The reason is clear: at a time when too much of the political discourse has descended into rumors and name-calling, people are turning off the traditional media and looking to interact directly with each other and with their leaders. They seek dialogue as a Nation, not just monologues from a handful of political figures.

23. It is no secret that I believe the new media plays an important role in our political and civic future. But I want - and I will encourage - a debate that takes place across all media, across all parts of our country.

24. I want a dialogue that builds on the themes we've discussed today and that are central to the success of the new media. One that is transparent and allows people to hold public officials accountable. One that is open to all people and in the service of all of our people. And one that is built on respect and fairness, not personal attacks.

25. I firmly believe that there is vital place in that dialogue for a vibrant, free and informed media. If we are truly to build a democracy that is responsive to the needs of all the people, we need a media - both old and new - that is empowered to responsibly report what they see, without fear of consequence, and to hold governments and public officials accountable for the results they achieve or do not achieve.

26. And that is why as one of my first official acts, I lifted the ban on two media outlets which are extensions of the Opposition at the federal level.

RESPONSIBLE REPORTING

27. We need world-class, fact based reporting in Malaysia. The media must be fair and responsible in your reporting. It is crucial if we are to foster a constructive debate about our nation's future. I believe we can move beyond those who offer the journalism of conspiracy theory and rumor.

28. When I talk about responsible reporting, I certainly do not mean the responsibility to take the side of the government. Indeed, to me, responsible reporting means looking more skeptically and critically at some of the claims from all sides and rumors which make up too great a part of our political discourse.

29. This is not just true in Malaysia but such distortions exist even in the most advanced nations in the world.

30. In the United States, for instance, over 40 per cent of Americans in 2007 felt that Saddam Hussein was behind the attacks of September 11th, despite no evidence of any link whatsoever.

31. And in last year's U.S. Presidential election, radio and print media perpetrated a myth that Barack Obama was a Muslim. Media with an agenda sought to sow seeds of fear among the public's by releasing images of Obama in Sudan wearing traditional tribal wear; regularly using his middle name, Hussein; and deliberately mispronouncing his name as Osama. The result: in one poll, fully 12% of Americans thought Obama was a Muslim, and in some states such as Texas, almost 1 in 4 thought the now-President a Muslim.

32. The power of the media, particularly the print and broadcast media, is not only in reporting the news; it is also in lending credibility to stories and rumors that percolate up from the grassroots and the internet. The media best serves the public interest when it goes beyond the superficial; when it asks the tough questions of the rumor-mongers; when it does not lend credence to false innuendo, and instead reports on facts and detail - whether that is helpful to the government or not.

33. Personal attacks have undermined public confidence in the political process and done nothing to bring us closer to achieving the goals we have for this country.

34. I've endured my fair share of these from some quarter of the media. I will always stand up and be accountable for the decisions I make as your Prime Minister. But I also know that the personal slurs and false accusations leveled against national leaders are deeply damaging to our nation's political discourse and international reputation.

35. Countering such personal attacks is not the sole responsibility of any one party or any one person. It is the responsibility of every responsible individual. So, today, I call on all parties, all political leaders and all people who want to engage in a new national conversation about the future of our nation - including the media - to do so in a way that respects opinions of others; that values discussion and discourse; and that recognizes that opponents need not be enemies, that

differences of opinion do not come from malicious motives, but from a deep and abiding concern for the future of Malaysia.

36. Together, as we focus on the most pressing needs of our country, I hope that such colourful reporting will be consigned to history. It too often presents a world that bears no resemblance to reality and only serves to damage the public discourse we truly need.

CONCLUSION

37. Ladies and gentlemen, these are trying times for our country, as they are for all countries around the world, and yet I truly believe we have a remarkable opportunity, with new leadership, to build ONE MALAYSIA, PEOPLE FIRST, PERFORMANCE NOW.

38. Malaysia needs a comprehensive economic model that positions us for the long-term.

39. But, as important as that is, we, too, need a national consensus around how that and the other important policy debates of our time must be joined:

- o Transparently and openly
- o Respectfully and fairly, and
- o With the interests of every Malaysian at heart

40. A vibrant political and public dialogue is the best way forward for our country; the times demand it and the people expect it. Let us not fail them.

Copyright of the Prime Minister's Office portal

Source:

http://www.pmo.gov.my/home.php?menu=speech&page=1676&news_id=117&speech_cat=2