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2019.10: Abdillah Noh, Malaysia One Year After: An Interview with Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar

MAY 4, 2019

Malaysia experienced the first change of government since its independence in 1957 when the Barisan Nasional (BN) was defeated by the Pakatan Harapan (PH, "Alliance of Hope") coalition on May 9, 2018. The twist to the plot is that the PH victory was led by Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who previously had served as prime minister for twenty-two years as a member of the BN. At ninety-three years old Mahathir broke his allegiance with the BN and the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) - the major component party of the BN – to join hands with opposition leaders who were once his arch enemies.

For insight on this political change and the challenges that the PH government faces, Abdillah Noh sat down for an interview with Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, who served in government roles for more than thirty years, including stints as Law, Foreign Affairs, and Home Minister. Like Dr Mahathir, Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, along with other senior UMNO and BN leaders such as Rafidah Aziz, [1] Daim Zainuddin, [2] and Rais Yatim, [3] broke ranks during the last election and joined the PH.

Q: Did the election results surprise you?

A: No. I spoke to various leaders of an (imminent change) since 1998. When I met Dr Mahathir, I said that if we do not change our days are numbered. We have had it too good for too long. Usually

a party that is based on nationalism would last for three or four decades at the most. Just look at African countries and even the Kuomintang party (KMT) in Taiwan. The signs were there that they [BN] had to change but instead they became set in their ways. According to foreign reports, they saw the changes [in popular opinion] possibly about two weeks before the election ... they felt that some of us, people like Rafidah [Rafidah Aziz], Daim [Daim Zainnuddin], Rais [Rais Yatim], and me turned the whole thing because we were considered at one time, of wanting the status quo because of the fear of the unknown.

Q: What were some of the telling signs?

A: The ministers became more elitist. They [BN] began to choose leaders not based on ability but on association. And the party had become a business entity. I contested in a number of party seats (at one time) but I could not win because I did not have the money. So money politics was intertwined with your future as a politician and the leaders became arrogant. Also, they no longer do what they say. Say for example, they say that you must be frugal but they don't live frugally. They say that you must support the national education policy but they send their children to international schools or overseas.

Q: Did you inform the party leaders of your concerns?

A: I told Pak Lah [Abdullah Ahmad Badawi][4] and Najib [Najib Razak][5] and Dr Mahathir about money politics. I said that if we don't change we are going to lose. I said, at present we are using the strong arm of the law to discipline people but this cannot last. I saw how difficult it was to unwind UMNO. Najib was absolutely sure of a win. He got feedback from his consultants. But we think that they [consultants] were divorced from the reality of the grassroots. They were elitist. You have got a system that people do not like, from the monarchy, the government to the judiciary, even the security forces. They are not seen to serve the public. They serve the interest of the government to the extent that people feel that there is no justice and that they are not protected.

Q: So the top leaders knew about the problems yet change was difficult?

A: The leadership knew something was wrong with the regime. They could not change because the machinery was too overwhelming. Pak Lah [Abdullah Ahmad Badawi] started the democratic movement and freedom movement. But then there were cliques within the party. The system of warlords was not only at the national level but at the grassroots level. UMNO leaders were divorced from the reality of the voters. Najib used the slogan that business cannot be as usual and this was talked about by UMNO leaders. In reality they could not change because of the fear that if they were to make changes the system was too strong that they would be gotten rid of.

Q: What do you mean by the system?

A: Power is intoxicating. If I disturb the whole thing, it may affect my own position. In fact I once asked Dr Mahathir. He was telling me about corruption. As a party leader I asked him that if you know that there are quite a number of corrupt people why don't you take action and the public will support you? But he said that in a party system there are so many individuals and if you want to do something and you upset the status quo they might get rid of you and you can't do anything.

Q: *BN lost because of issues surrounding 1MDB?[6]*

A: There was a lot of anger because the government was not willing to come out openly. I think the public, especially Malays, have high tolerance, they can accept that it [1MDB] is a bad business decision. But when there were allegations of abuses of power and corruption, and the ministers were all saying that there was nothing wrong and then when a report [on 1MDB] was kept confidential, people got suspicious. I think Najib was sure that money is king. He spent a lot and you must acknowledge he had a lot of good policies. But the government was seen as arrogant and not accountable, and they looked at the public and voters as nincompoops or so stupid that they would accept everything that was pushed down their throats. I think 1MDB was a factor among urban voters, non-Malays, and the young, who opposed the issues of governance that were not addressed. Politically there was corruption in the whole system. So I think that besides 1MDB, there was also the arrogance of the leaders; their all-knowing attitudes, and the way they treated the public. It was too elitist. The issue of nepotism was at its highest. The issue of nepotism started from the time of Dr Mahathir. He asked Pak Lah to appoint Najib [as prime minister]. Somehow along the way he found that Najib did not deliver, not only policies, but also did not deliver integrity, governance, that sort of thing.

Q: *How bad were things during the Najib administration?*

A: I think it was multilevel. If you look at it from the security, law, and order perspective, it was very bad. Socially, there was no cohesiveness. Suddenly there was a new element of political identity. People became conscious of their own identities and they demanded their rights as minorities, those sorts of thing. They [the government] did not handle it well. I think the most important thing is that we entered the industrial revolution 4.0 age and there was the increasing role of social media. They (the public) were not interested in language and semantics, manners and all that. They were not interested in dishing out the truth but were interested in dishing out perception. So the perception killed the government.... they lost the battle of perception.

Q: *Regime change had been in the works for twenty years, this time it worked.*

A: Anwar [Anwar Ibrahim][7] tried two or three times. They needed a formula, a good communicator. You know what, it was unimaginable that they could agree, especially the DAP (Democratic Action Party), on a common symbol. So there was no more confusion... they chose one [a symbol of one of the coalition's parties] and everyone agreed and this was the ruling of Dr Mahathir. His strength, I think, and he is not necessary right all the time, but his strength is in a way

Machiavellian. What do you want? Do you want to win? You want to win or you want to lose? If you want to win then you must be willing to do all sorts of things.

Q: How big is the Mahathir factor in shifting public opinion?

A: Dr Mahathir is a strategist. That was the strength of Pakatan Harapan when they picked him. This is a man who the public knows has got a track record of leadership. So it was a fantastic mixture. He is also a tactician. You can become a strategist but to become a tactician is another thing and Dr Mahathir is both.

Q: Tactician in the sense of?

A: This is not the guy that says, "Ok and this is the strategy." He himself implements a strategy and provides the tactics for what is to be done or not to be done. They knew that the public was not happy with leadership, they kept banging on leadership and that was the tactic ... the community was unfairly treated, that there were injustices, everyone was corrupt, the civil service was corrupt, and they kept on banging on it, this was tactical ... ethnicity was irrelevant because they [the voters] now go on symbols. They imagined that they shared the same frustrations, the disillusionment of being mistreated, and that they suffered. So that's how I see it.

Q: The strategy and the manifesto worked?

A: Now you see it crystal clear ... even Dr Mahathir in an interview recently said that we made all kinds of promises and people who wrote the manifesto were all academics. There was no practical experience and they did not know how government functions. Dr Mahathir said that he did not think that they were going to win. Some of the promises were a bit ridiculous ... not practical and applicable. So what they did was to capture the imagination of people who had been mistreated. The cost of living was high, the economy not good. The government had misappropriated money ...

Q: Are we seeing the end of ethnic politics?

A: Unfortunately only at this election. We are still very ethnically-based, you know. If you look at Bersatu [United Malaysian Indigenous Party] it is still Malay-based. It is an UMNO replacement or UMNO substitute. They say that they do not like to be like UMNO, but if you go to their general assembly ... it is just another version of UMNO, a Malay party ... if you look at PKR (People's Justice Party), they also have competing interests and they have the race [imperative] even in their representation. If you look at DAP (Democratic Action Party) it is totally Chinese. Amanah (National Trust Party) is seen as liberal Muslims. So I would love to see the day that we contest on policies, on ideas ...

Q: Should the PH undo ethnic politics?

A: I thought that is what they should do. But the way they are moving, I think not. People still talk of representing their ethnic interests. You know there is less tolerance now. The undercurrent is not good. You just look at the language when we mooted the ICERD [the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination]. Actually ICERD was started by Najib. He got a committee that looked into ratifying ICERD. But the resentment toward ICERD was as much legal as it was ethnic. It was seen as an affront to Islam and the Malay position.

Q: *Is it difficult to undo the current situation because of mutually exclusive institutions that are based on ethnicity?*

A: You cannot undo this because of disparity. Now you've got inter- and intra-ethnic disparity. The disparity between the haves and the have-nots are widening. If you look at it, eighty percent of the B40 group are Malays. So institutions and all the things that go to implementing policies have to be there because otherwise the Malays feel unprotected. The Chinese and Indians are facing a different situation. I think it is difficult. There is nothing to bring [different ethnic groups] together ... if you talk of political identity, in this country you need a revolution and that revolution is going to cause a lot of damage. There will be untold misery because people are so divided.

Q: *But surely there can be laws or policies to dilute the existence of these exclusive institutions?*

A: We are supposed to be inclusive but the problem is, when you have got a divide, I trust my own kind. There is still trust but that trust does not go outside the [ethnic] paradigm ...we cannot leave this as it is because it will be a time bomb. Whatever people may say about May 13,[8] I do not consider it as ethnic but it was more of a class struggle, economic. When economic success is related to one particular ethnic group and the other ethnic groups feel that they are marginalized there will be ethnic confrontation that will lead to violence.

Q: *Can we expect a new political arrangement from the new government that is different from the previous regime?*

A: The intentions are there. The objectives are there but I think they are facing a lot of obstacles because of the lack of experience; you know most of the ministers. There is an intention and I think that the public wants that intention to be translated into action ... when you are entering a new house and entering a new environment ... the house is different, the environment is difficult, so alignment, realignment and adjustments, understanding the customs and procedures, traditions you know.

Q: *So what are some of the things that the new ministers should keep in mind?*

A: You see, first if you look at the ministers, you must look at their background. Their background is that they spent all their time as the opposition and some of them are from NGOs or were activists, so

they have different norms and values. So from being a streetfighter demanding change and having no responsibility to make the change, now the responsibility is on their shoulders. Now as much as they want to talk about freedom or democracy, they now have to act collectively. There is a certain tradition in governing, especially when it comes to being a cabinet minister. First, when ministers speak it is policy. So you do not speak until it becomes policy. Second, you cannot have your individual opinion no matter what you think is the merit. If you study British constitutional law, you discard your individual rights; when it comes to the cabinet it is a collective decision. So you have to support each other. You cannot say that I do not agree with this minister, not in public anyway. I sometimes disagreed. There are a lot of things discussed in the cabinet but once there is a cabinet decision you should not question it anymore, not because of the lack of democracy but because there is a system. Otherwise it will disintegrate into individual choices.

Q: Can you elaborate on the “system”?

A: The system has got its dos and don'ts. You cannot simply shout that you are doing the right thing and that you want to champion the rights of the people because the venue has changed; from the street to the assembly, from public rhetoric to the closed door meeting of the cabinet. This means there is a need to accommodate, to compromise. Politics is a game of accommodation and compromise. If you cannot agree then you go out and become an individual or become a member of parliament where you have more liberty. I remember my father. After he resigned as deputy minister he said, “I do not want to come back because I am a guy who likes to speak up and I cannot speak if I am part of the system.” I remember Dr Mahathir once told one of the cabinet ministers who sided with the public and even joined a demonstration after the cabinet had made a different decision. Dr Mahathir said, if you speak out against the government then you should resign ... that is what Zaid Ibrahim (a former Law Minister) did when he was in government. He was too much of an individual and he had his own views. There is also the issue of cabinet papers. You cannot discuss them until they have been declassified. Before you come for cabinet meetings, you should not give papers to your party to be discussed. You cannot. I think many of them (ministers) thought that they can still go to a rally or stand up on a rostrum and say what they think of certain things. They cannot. It is not just about being clever. Genius has to be compromised with collective interest.

Q: Are you suggesting that personalities with strong views must now come to a compromise to serve the public good?

A: The government has got its own version of the public good and if you have got your own you cannot [participate]. Take the example of Brexit and how principled they (ministers) are. They are part of a political party, part of the system, but when it reaches the stage where they disagree, they leave. Otherwise they will undermine the government. We should reach that maturity. I believe we have not reached that maturity. Also if you are tainted you do not have to be told to go. You should go to save the government and the party. And if you have certain things that you have done that can damage the government you should take the brave and courageous decision to leave. In countries like the United Kingdom and Japan, if something happens to the ministry, the minister will resign even

when it has nothing to do with the minister. We do not have that.

Q: What are some of the challenges facing the ministers?

A: This is me talking from the outside. I think when they ... will have culture shock. There are certain decisions that the civil servants do not want to make. You as a minister must then lead. You must make the decision. They [civil servants] will prepare background papers but you must decide. There are rules and customs and traditions. A lot of the ministers must now understand that generally when they speak on facts and figures their words become gospel. You must check the facts, whether these are correct, whether in Parliament or outside. Once you become a minister your words are not simply rhetoric.

Q: So the ministers must learn and learn quickly?

A: I was from the private sector. I was one of the few who joined the government later because Dr Mahathir asked me to join. I held positions as a CEO, all kinds of things. I have the experience of managing people. Yet when I joined the cabinet for a few sessions, I just observed what my colleagues were saying and how they reacted to one another. Then when I was more settled I began to speak out. I think observing is very important. And if you are asked questions by the press and if you don't know, say "I will check." Do not do otherwise because your answer will damn you subsequently. Policy-wise it is also the same. You might say that I am going to recommend things to the government but then you must be sure. You have a gazette for ministers and the first thing you need to do is to look at the standing orders or the government acts. The gazette tells you your responsibilities. If you join a particular ministry these are your functions. The gazette describes your functions and the functions of other ministries. So it pays to observe and watch and learn and learn very quickly. One of the things that Dr Mahathir did when I was a minister and this was when I reported for duty to see him, when I asked his expectations of me. I have been known for being vocal and liking to speak up and he told me and this is very telling ... he said, "Syed, now that you are a member of government, if there is anything that you are not happy with [about] the civil service don't simply blurt out in public ... you can come and see me..."

Q: Are there other things that cabinet ministers should look out for?

A: I also feel that all of them (ministers) are entrenched in their parties. They forget that they have now created an imagined community, an imagined group that has to work together and share a vision and share values, so because of that we have seen a few mishaps that created problems for the government ... you are minister already. When you are minister you do not represent your ethnic group. You are a minister for all.

Q: So you need to know the language of government, the values, the norms; that ministers need to know the bureaucracy.

A: If I do not know I refer to people. You must have the humility to say that you do not know this new domain. You must know that you are in a changed position. There are some problems. Yesterday there was someone from the government [bureaucracy] who spoke to me off the record on the difficulties that they are facing; that ministers like to make their own decisions, forgetting that there is a system. When they make their own decisions and these cannot fit into the system, the bureaucracy feels out of place and so it only increases the divide. At present, I think more than before, this election has created a very big divide between the civil service and the political establishment ... Dr Mahathir also blamed them [civil servants] and he felt that they have not done what they should do. So now they are very cautious. Their reputation with the public has been damaged ... they need to build confidence and trust. The policy domain is the ministers' domain and the cabinet's domain. So ministers must explain policies very clearly and if there is a need for a change in policy they need to explain [to civil servants]; civil servants cannot come up with their own. There is some element of suspicion. You know Muhyiddin[9] may know it. Guan Eng[10] had been a member of the opposition as Chief Minister in Penang. But this is a different ball game. They underestimate the dimension and dynamics of the relationship [between the political establishment and the civil service]. You cannot succeed without the support of the civil service.

Q: Are there lessons that the new government can draw from the failure of the previous regime?

A: I think one is accessibility. Your constituents are the public. You must have a good ear to listen to the problems of the *rakyat* (the people). Also you must have the humility to say that you owe your position to them and you must really be clean. Do not mix business with politics. These are some of the cardinal principles for people to say that they are different. And they have been talking a lot about the rule of law. Rule of law is when you respect the due processes of the system and the most important thing is to deliver justice and fairness to everyone. Another thing they need to know is that the public now is not like the public of before. They are a questioning public. They have no qualms about telling you off. Also, they [government officials] must be seen to be responsive and sensitive and not wasteful. I remember Mahathir was telling us ministers that you must be careful about conspicuous consumption ... as a minister you must subdue your personality because you are no longer a private person. You are public property and as public property you have got to be very careful about what you do or not do.

Q: Your hopes for the new government?

A: I hope that after all the euphoria of a new government and freedom they will not slip into forgetfulness on the issues of governance, of corruption, of arrogance, and the know-it-all attitude. I hope that they will build a new Malaysia. They use the term *Malaysia Baru* [New Malaysia], so now they must put meaning to what the new Malaysia is all about. For instance, people who are tolerant of each other and can build a nation. I still feel that we have not built a nation, we have built a country. My hope is that people share and there is convergence of interest, of common values. We

are only a nation in sports so I would like to translate that into our daily life. I hope they can walk the talk.

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[1] Rafidah Aziz served as a UMNO Member of Parliament from 1982 until 2013. During this time she also served as minister of international trade and industry from 1987 to 2008. She is now a member of *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, a partner in the Pakatan Harapan coalition.

[2] Daim Zainuddin served as finance minister of Malaysia from 1984 until 1991.

[3] Rais Yatim served as Malaysia's minister of information from 1984 to 1986 and foreign minister from 1986 to 1987 and again from 2008 to 2009. Formerly a member of UMNO, he is now affiliated with the Bersatu (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party).

[4] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi served as prime minister of the Malay Federation from 2003 to 2009 and as a UNMO Member of Parliament from 1978 to 2013.

[5] Najib Razak served as prime minister from 2009 until 2018. After the UNMO-led BN coalition was defeated in the 2018 general election, he was arrested by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission in July of last year. He is now facing trial on multiple charges linked to 1MDB and its subsidiary company SRC International.

[6] 1MDB refers to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal which entangled UNMO leaders. For more information on recent developments, see *The Guardian*, April 19, 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/03/najib-razak-malaysia-former-prime-minister-trial-1mdb-scandal> (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/03/najib-razak-malaysia-former-prime-minister-trial-1mdb-scandal>).

[7] Anwar Ibrahim served as finance minister of Malaysia from 1991 until 1998 and deputy prime minister from 1993 to 1998. He was jailed by Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad from 1999 until 2004 on controversial charges, after which he became Malaysia's leading opposition figure. In

2018 Mahathir and Ibrahim joined forces in the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition and defeated the BN government. Ibrahim is now president of the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party) and

leader of the PH.

[8] On May 13, 1969, major ethnic riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur after a general election. Parliament was subsequently suspended for two years, until 1971.

[9] Muhyiddin Yassin, a former UNMO politician, is home affairs minister and member of Bersatu.

[10] Lim Guan Eng, who currently serves as finance minister, is a member of the Democratic Action Party.



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