

# Keynote Speech by YABhg Tun Dato' Musa Hitam

Former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia

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At the start of this discourse, let me first of all congratulate IDEAS for celebrating your 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary tonight. I notice that your leadership and membership list constitutes the young. This is very encouraging and the fact that simultaneously you commemorate the birthday of our father of independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, is most encouraging.

In my long, long life, I have been through many passages, mostly beautiful, some rough, and one or two really rough and tough. But having a very positive mind, with faith in Allah Subhana Wa T'ala, I accept all as God's gift as contained in the word, "Hikmah".

In going through my life, I think I have seen it all, especially in government and politics. All along I have always thought that I was tough, and that I could take it all. I thought that nothing could surprise me, nothing could shock me and that I have always managed to stay calm and collected especially in times of crisis. Calmness in crisis, indeed calmness as a character trait, enables one to make the right judgments and decisions.

Within the last few years, however, it seems to me that life in Malaysia is turning upside down and inside out. That makes it difficult to keep calm in government and politics particularly; behaviours seem to be based on the struggles that prioritise personal individual survival of the fittest. The end seems to justify the means and anything, anything goes. The dividing lines between good and bad, right and wrong, seem blurred.

Let me explain. In Malaysia it seems to me that politics and the government are, simply put, awful and a shame, especially when measured by standards set by our political

forefathers! In four years' time, it will 2020. Dr Mahathir told us all that by 2020, Malaysia would be a developed nation. By now, assuming all to be equal, we should just be about ready to cross the line of definition from 'developing' to 'developed'.

Unfortunately, though, it seems to me that the 2020 dream is falling apart bit by bit, but with alarming speed. The way it is, I am now certain that we will not reach our goal of Vision 2020! And if I may say at this early stage of my speech, it is ironic that Dr Mahathir's vision is now certain to fail because of Dr Mahathir himself. Brilliant that he was, he forgot that in order to succeed, he needed to train leaders at all levels, but most important, political leaders. But his personal leadership record shows that he did away with all potential leaders one by one or in groups, and retained and trained followers! And it is mostly these trained followers that have taken over the leadership of the country now.

These trained followers are dedicated and loyal to whoever sits at the very top. They need to be, in order to survive. In administering the government, they don't even seem to be coordinated in their statements and actions.

Amazingly, though, the leader that seems to be very calm all along is our current, topmost leader. He does not regard the current state of affairs in the country as a crisis but simply a "diversion, and he seems absolutely confident that he would survive it all. His calmness is so apparent so much so that whenever I am asked to explain his calmness, I can only offer this explanation: "The only rational explanation for his calmness is by offering an irrational one."

Since the irrational seems to be flying around so much now, let me tell you that the most common ones are, "Bomoh lah! Maybe Indian swamy! No lah, Indonesian Bugis! No, no, Kadazan! No, no, no, Negeri Sembilan, they are very good! Mana? Negeri Sembilan

bomohs stop rain mah!" Another one, "You listen to me, it is a Chinese temple priest!" So goes speculation after speculation, but listen to this desperate last ditch attempt –  
"Rosmah!"

Very, very unbelievable, yet very funny.

Please, please take those widely known remarks in good humour, please. But seriously though, to me personally, all the above are actually symptomatic of a very serious state of affairs in our country. Confusion reigns. Fear for the country and all things related is getting to be a regular nightmare. Rumours and speculation are the order of the day. The media and spin doctors have a field day each day. News and analysis border widely from the most believable to the most bizarre and atrocious.

The only strong signals emanating from the leadership that show any sign of worry are the threats coming from them of 'tightening' selected security legislation as well as legislation that seems to be aimed at free speech and the press, with some allegedly even constitutionally questionable.

Where have we gone wrong? Well, on this you don't have to wait or search for answers, because it is all there: everywhere you see, everywhere you read, you hear, in the media, at gathering and even among school children!

On a positive note, let me say that I have never seen such a widespread of people's participation in politics amongst Malaysian citizens. This is mainly the result of the spread of education creating a huge middle class crossing racial and religious lines, also the arrival of digital democracy and the popularity of social media.

But the question is still, where have we gone wrong? The answer is, if I may cap it all, it is all wholly and simply caused by the failure of leadership!

In an open, democratic, liberal, moderate country, the government could only be sustainable provided it is led by genuine democrats. Once the leadership tries to restrict and control thoughts, behaviours and expressions, the autocrats thrive. And when a leader imposes himself and demands unquestioning loyalty, accompanied by loss of respect of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as not being considerate of the people's welfare, the ugly head of a dictatorship appears.

Malaysia is a beautiful country made up of beautiful people. We have also been blessed with our forefathers who led us to where we are. Tun Abdul Razak is a legendary figure. The father of development is certainly an apt remembrance for him. Care for the ordinary citizen as his top priority was certainly the factor that has seen a relatively widespread distribution of wealth through the spirit of hard work and education. Tun Dr Ismail can simply be described as a man of principle, integrity and action based on considerate awareness. He was firm but fair. He was a man feared but respected by friends and foes alike.

One thing, however, was clear about Malaysia. It was leadership that has brought us where we are today. And towering above all is the figure of Tunku Abdul Rahman, our father of independence. This prince, more known as a playboy in his very early years and least to be imagined as prime minister material, was the most timely gift to lead our country to independence and beyond. The royalty in him earned him the high esteem that the people needed then, with mainstream Malaysians still very feudal in mentality. His very 'human' conduct in his daily life endeared him to the common people. Above all, his understanding of democratic practices made politics then something that we could marvel about. I can relate to these first-hand.

In those early days of our history, politics was more ideological than material. There were indeed, yes, indeed, two camps in UMNO: the Tunku camp and the Razak camp. The Tunku camp was clearly and unapologetically right wing, pro-west and pro-business. The Razak camp was allegedly socialist-communist inclined, a brand enough to scare and scuttle people away all the way in those days when communist terrorists were the biggest threat to our independence.

The point I wish to make about the Tunku is that there I was, an identified Razak boy, who was Executive Secretary of UMNO, literally running the party machinery, having very regular contact with the Tunku as President of the Party. Yet, never had I felt any sign of displeasure or any unwillingness on his part to see me regularly on any matter relating to party affairs. Not only that, person-to-person, he was always accommodating and kind.

Let me relate to you a few anecdotes:

After I was offered a leadership grant by the U.S. government, I went to see the Tunku to seek his permission. I still remember how he responded to my request, "Watpa you nak pergi Amerika nak belajar sana tu. Depa bodoh! You pergi U.N. lah." While addressing me, he pushed his call button and when his secretary, Jee came in, he told Jee, "Ini Musa nak pergi Amerika. Biar dia pergi New York lah, U.N." There rested my case! That incident actually launched my exposure to international affairs!

Another anecdote: When Tun Razak decided the Johor Menteri Besar should be asked to retire, he asked me to go to Alor Star to inform the Tunku and seek his permission. On arrival at the Tunku's house after a long drive from Kuala Lumpur, no flying and no highway then, Tunku asked me to join him for lunch – just him and me. Hot, hot sambal and ulam-ulam all, it took me hardly ten minutes to get him to agree to Tun Razak's

proposal. After lunch, he asked me to get into his car to accompany him to his hill 'retreat', which turned out to be a mere simple kampong house-type on a hill. But the amazing thing was that all the way driving through the kampong, he seemed never ending in greeting the village folks. All seemed very friendly and respectful of him, in spite of the fact that we entered the stronghold of the opposition Islamic party PAS!

Another anecdote: Whenever preparing a speech for the Tunku, the written text needed to be in bold letters and spaced broadly. Once while addressing a huge crowd, the Tunku suddenly paused and seemed to have difficulty in reading the text. Then he muttered, right in front of the myriad of microphones, "Apa ni! Entah apa depa tulis ni tak faham." After a brief moment of uneasy silence, the whole crowd burst into laughter and claps, I guess because of the spontaneous remarks he made and the very human and very endearing way it was expressed.

Only once did I get a public criticism from the Tunku. When I was an international student leader, I had the occasion to argue with the Prime Minister of Ceylon then, Solomon West Dias Bandaranaike, at a tea reception in Colombo. Having been a guest at the Malayan Independence Day in Kuala Lumpur, Mr. Bandaranaike reminded me that Malaya would be in racial turmoil within a few years. I protested and denied that it would ever happen. At the same time though, that conversation left an indelible and disturbing mark in my mind. Thus, within this framework of mind, when I later became UMNO Secretary and delivering speeches, I never failed to remind my audience that being a multi-racial country practising parliamentary democracy, Malaysians should always learn from the experiences of Ceylon and be forewarned of the dangers of racial conflicts. My remarks were often widely publicised. One day, with bold letters in Utusan Melayu, the Tunku was reported to have admonished me by branding, but not naming

me, as “budak-budak ubun lembut” (children still soft in the head) trying to teach elder leaders what to do.

The anecdotes I relate above are simple sum-ups of the Tunku and the endearing personality that enabled Malaysia to sail on to progress. It was also his ability to identify, choose, encourage and nurture others to be prepared to take over the leadership of both the party and country. Parliament was robust, noisy and questioning on all matters related to the government. The leadership subjected themselves to the closest scrutiny. Representatives in form and substance really represented the people. On my personal part, my major criticism of the Tunku was that he continued to run the government ‘intuitively’, whereas as we progressed, what the country needed was a ‘scientific’ government.

It was a blot in our country’s history that the Tunku was very roughly treated especially after his retirement. But then, in the end, the Tunku regained the respect and admiration of Malaysians.

Tonight, you must have noticed that my presentation was not an intellectual or academic analysis. The first part was so current but presented by one as an axed ex-Deputy Prime Minister, having gone through the rough and tumble of Malaysian politics. On the Tunku, I was actually presenting him as the man, as a man. I hope that it is useful and provocative enough to make it worthwhile for you to be with me tonight.

Thank you friends, for your indulgence and thank you and congratulations IDEAS.

May Allah bless us all.