

Transcript of Interview with PM Najib ON 26th ASEAN Summit

23 April 2015



PUTRAJAYA: Herewith is the transcript of an interview with Datuk Seri Najib Razak on the 26th Asean Summit to be hosted by Malaysia on April 26 and 27 in Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi. The Prime Minister was interviewed by Bernama deputy editor-in-chief Mokhtar Hussain and editors, Nor Faridah Abd Rashid, Abdul Rahman Ahmad and Jamaluddin Muhammad.

QUESTION: What is the significance of the 26th Asean Summit with Malaysia playing host? What does Malaysia want to achieve?

NAJIB: Since the establishment of Asean in 1967, I consider this year is the most significant in the development of Asean as a regional entity. This year we will be declaring (and) proclaiming Asean as an economic community. The proclamation of Asean as an economic community is very significant and this happens at the time when Malaysia is the Chair of Asean. So this year is a historic moment. That's why I really hope that the Asean Summit this year will leave a deep impression in the annals of Asean's history as a regional body.

QUESTION: Some quarters have questioned why the summit is being held at two places, namely Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi. What is the rationale?

NAJIB: I want to create something different. First, of course, the Asean Summit preliminary session has to be held in Kuala Lumpur because it will become the focus of not only the whole country but also at the regional and international levels... It's easier for the delegates to converge when the conference is held in Kuala Lumpur. I also chose to have the retreat in Langkawi as the atmosphere is quite different. The situation is more relaxed, hence we can exchange ideas in a more informal atmosphere with the hope that we can further strengthen relations between Asean leaders. In addition, I also intend to promote Langkawi as a major tourist destination in the region.

QUESTION: As the Chair of Asean in 2015, how will Malaysia go about spearheading Asean in the march towards the Asean Community?

NAJIB: We must make sure that we can fulfill every content in the Asean blueprint as a community centered on the three pillars of Asean. We will do so even though we know that the blueprint extends beyond 2015. Besides that, we create Asean as an economic community that capitalises on a market of 625 million people with GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of US\$2.5 trillion. In addition, Asean is a community whose middle class is growing. This means the purchasing power (of Asean) as a community will continue to rise. So, the significance of Asean as a community will be more compelling if the blueprint can be implemented in full.

QUESTION: What is the Asean Community mould that Malaysia is after? What are the challenges and steps taken to achieve it?

NAJIB: We want to create an Asean Community that is more politically cohesive and more integrated economically and also much stronger ... more robust in terms of social development and culture. This can be seen from the blueprint, we can do this and in addition, we must ensure the security and stability of the region. Thus, not only do we see Asean as a community internally, instead Asean's relations with regional powers, especially superpowers are also important as the South China Sea and the Straits of Melaka are two important and strategic waterways. That is why the significance of Asean is not only in the context of Asean itself, but also in a wider context.

QUESTION: Could you elaborate on the 'People-Centred Asean' vision that would be permeated among the more than 600 million Asean population in line with the theme 'Our People, Our Community, Our Vision' at the summit?

NAJIB: Malaysia has chosen the People-Centred Asean theme as it appears to me the concept of Asean has not been fully appreciated by the people of Asean countries... So, when we focus on the people, we must communicate with them so that they understand and appreciate the significance of Asean in the overall macro context and understanding as an individual. For example, visiting (Asean countries) without visa, it is significant to the individual. If we are exporters, we can export to the 10 Asean countries without tariff barriers. It means that we look at the bigger market. In addition, our ability to work as professionals, moving to other Asean countries. If we are a corporate entity, we can invest in Asean, create branches based on regional considerations. It's a great sense of depth in

the context of the individual and the larger group. Similarly, Malaysia is trying to identify certain communities or groups in Asean that should be given emphasis. For example, entrepreneurs are among the branches that we want to focus on. That is why we have MaGIC (Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre), a centre to develop entrepreneurial activities that can be capitalised by Asean. We also want to focus on youths as it is a group or groups of people who are very important to continue Asean's survival in the future. The leadership involves NGOs (non-governmental organisations), civil society, members of Parliament, all play a role in disseminating the significance of Asean to every group in Asean.

QUESTION: The Asean Summit is expected to issue a declaration that touches on moderation. How will Datuk Seri execute this concept in Asean? To what extent is it important in the Asean context and beyond?

NAJIB: Moderation is very important as it is one of the main values already accepted at the Asean level. It should be applied in messages or narratives in Asean conferences to remind us that if the region is to remain safe and peaceful, first, we must reject fanaticism, extremism and militancy. Second, it should be stressed that the problems are not emanating from religion. In the context of Asean, we see many religions, faiths practiced. But the different beliefs should not lead to conflict or discord. This is not confined to any particular religion, but in general ... Whatever religion, if extremism, fanaticism and militancy take root, definitely discord and conflicts will occur. So, this is the message we are trying to deliver not only while Malaysia spearheads Asean in 2015, but for a continuous period.

QUESTION: After nearly five decades of Asean's existence, what is Datuk Seri's analysis on its effectiveness in ensuring regional security and stability?

NAJIB: As a regional body, Asean is deemed to be very successful. In general, the region is peaceful and stable compared with other regions as they are embroiled in conflict or escalating tensions. However, Asean as we can see is generally safe and stable although there are still places where the process to find solutions is still ongoing. For example, in the context of Bangsamoro (in the Philippines), of which we are the facilitator (for bringing peace between the Bangsamoro people and the Philippine government). In southern Thailand, it (the process to bring peace in the volatile area) is also still in progress and Malaysia is also the facilitator.

QUESTION: What is your view on reports about tensions in the South China Sea due to overlapping claims of maritime areas? What is the status of negotiations on the Code of Conduct?

NAJIB: I see this as a challenge - overlapping claims in the South China Sea is a complex and sensitive issue. In fact, any question on overlapping territorial claims and so forth between two countries on a bilateral basis is complex, especially when it is multilateral in nature, involving many countries. China also has a major interest in this matter. Of course, when it involves several Asean countries and superpowers and so forth, of course, the issue is more complex and multi-

dimensional. That is why we must address the issue with prudence based on the principles that we have identified. These principles, among others, stipulate that we must negotiate without the show of force, without raising tension or using tactics such as applying pressure on smaller countries and so forth. It is one of the principles. Another principle is that based on law, the rule of law as spelt out under UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) because this is the principle of settlement of any claim on the basis of rule-based. Without rule-based, it is hard for us to find an amicable solution. Third, a guideline should be sought so that the daily situation would not trigger a clash. That is why the Declaration of Conduct and thus, it needed to be translated into a Code of Conduct in creating a form a guideline for all parties on daily relations even if there are overlapping claims, but would not cause a friction or conflict in the region.

QUESTION: There are reports of escalating tensions in the region. How can the countries involved resolve the situation?

NAJIB: That is why I had said that we should try to avoid this problem from deteriorating to extreme levels. I cannot deny differences of opinion do exist and probably bilateral tensions to some extent, but in general, we can still control this issue and we can play a role in the Asean context so that we can still manage this issue until we can find a solution. But it is not easy because this issue is very complex and sensitive.

QUESTION: Asean is capable of bringing world superpowers to sit at the same table to discuss matters of common interest. How does Datuk Seri see Asean's clout on the international stage?

NAJIB: We are recognised, that is why the East Asia Summit (EAS) as a regional form of architecture is welcomed by the superpowers with the participation of China, the United States, Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand and so on. So we see that the EAS has received an overwhelming response and they recognise this regional architecture as an important platform. In addition, the superpowers have also endorsed that in the regional architecture context, it must be spearheaded by Asean, which means the centrality of Asean is very important. So Asean has become like a prime mover to the regional architecture, AES and they respect the role played by Asean.

QUESTION: To what extent do you see the level of threat posed by IS militants in Asean and how do you handle it?

NAJIB: This issue has been discussed at sub-Asean forums, namely the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus meeting in Langkawi recently. This means that Asean is aware and has acted through defence ministers, home ministers, armed forces and others in order to enhance cooperation. This is to enable Asean through collective and bilateral efforts work more closely to address the IS threat which we cannot and are unable to handle individually. We must act collectively.

QUESTION: Will this issue be discussed at the Asean Summit?

NAJIB: Definitely, but a detailed discussion is more appropriately done in forums such as the ADMM, but in principle, of course, it will be touched by the heads of government.

QUESTION: Datuk Seri, as the establishment of the Asean Economic Community (AEC) is eight months away, what are other preparations needed to be carried out by Asean?

NAJIB: There are several things that need to be done in the context of Asean as an economic community. Definitely, tariff reduction or abolition, this can be further expanded. In addition, we cannot allow non-tariff barriers to exist. This is a new threat whereby even if we are to reduce financial tariffs, non-tariff barriers, if they go up, they will become counter productive. So, this is what I want to emphasise in my interventions and speeches that we must accept the concept of Asean as an economic community in a comprehensive way, and not agreeing on one aspect but on other aspects, we allow what we call "pricing nationalism" as it is a threat that could negate our efforts to realise Asean as a meaningful economic community.

QUESTION: If this assumption is anything to go by, certain quarters feel that the AEC may not come to fruition.

NAJIB: Quite the opposite. Instead, I believe it will be achieved when we announce Asean as an economic community at year-end. In fact, we have achieved a lot, but we must keep our focus so that we will not allow domestic pressure in the form of non-tariff protection and barriers to become a threat to the concept of Asean as an economic community.

QUESTION: Datuk Seri, there is still imbalance in terms of economic growth, and provision of basic infrastructure and Asean connectivity among Asean members. What is your comment Datuk Seri?

NAJIB: To reduce or close the development gap is one of Asean's agenda. So, we encourage that in terms of the connectivity masterplan, we want to see how countries that are not balanced in terms of the level of development are given the opportunity to catch-up or to further their development, especially in terms of infrastructure and connectivity so that their development will be more inclusive and balanced. Efforts should be made at the Asean level, but the role of each government is also very important to determine the level of development in the context of each country can be achieved. If it is not high, moderately high. But generally, collectively, Asean can achieve a growth rate of five to six per cent, an achievement that can be regarded as encouraging.

QUESTION: How will Asean overcome the tendency of some Asean countries to introduce non-tariff barriers that could offset the realisation of a single open market?

NAJIB: We hope they will use political will (to avoid this from happening) because sometimes it happens during an election, a tendency to play the populist sentiment. But on the whole, every Asean leader realises that Asean is greater than the narrow interest that I describe as narrow

nationalism. If this narrow nationalism persists, it will not really benefit them. If we always play up populist issues, ultimately they will not benefit our country.

QUESTION: The global business community is now seen giving more attention to China and India. How to distract them towards Asean?

NAJIB: I want to highlight Asean as 'the third force', it means they cannot focus on countries with large markets such as China and India alone. But Asean's size collectively boasts 625 million people, having a rising middle class that can represent what I see as the third force which is vibrant and has great potential.

QUESTION: As Malaysia is the Chair of Asean in 2015 and a non-permanent member to the United Nations Security Council, how will Malaysia capitalise on these roles to voice Asean's interest at the international level?

NAJIB: For example, as Asean chairman, Malaysia has been invited to represent the organisation at the G20 Summit in Turkey this year. I was invited in the capacity as Asean chairman to the summit. This means, when major powers gather, meet and deliberate at the conference, Asean is represented through Malaysia. When I speak at the United Nations soon, God willing, it means I can espouse Malaysia's role as chairman of Asean, and if there are other forums as well, I can I drive home Asean's messages to the world.

QUESTION: What is the important message that will be expounded by Malaysia at the Asean Summit and what are the next steps for Asean after 2015?

NAJIB: We have two important messages. First, to realise the Asean blueprint as a community, and second, with Malaysia as Asean chairman, we will begin the process of charting the post-2015 vision for Asean. This is a guideline on the future vision of Asean. It means, this is a big significance for Malaysia and Asean this year as we want to go further, not only with the proclamation of Asean as an economic community but also the post-2015 vision for Asean. -- Bernama

Source: [New Straits Times](#)

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