



Ministry of Information, Communication & Culture

An exclusive report to be distributed with ***THE INDEPENDENT***

Transcript of the interview with:

YB Dato' Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim

Minister of Information, Communication & Culture

WORLD REPORT: As an introduction, please discuss Malaysia in the 21st century, and the challenges it faces in the immediate future, to transform itself into a modern nation.

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: As a Muslim nation, we face a number of challenges, many of them associated with the negative perception Islam encounters worldwide. We can be good Muslims, but at the same time we must become good inhabitants of the world. But that is not easy. If you remain here long enough you will see and feel that it is a very different country, from the way it is seen internationally. We have to live with that kind of situation. We have Kelantan which is now under a total Islamic government. The state of Perak is now back to the Barisan Nasional or National Front (BN). Selangor is under Mr. Anwar Ibrahim's party the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

WORLD REPORT: Please tell us about your place of birth.

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: Negeri Sembilan, about 35 minutes south of Kuala Lumpur. This country has the most number of Sultans. There are 14 states and nine Sultanates. It is not easy. But we have managed. Thanks to the British system we have instituted your rule of law, educational hierarchy, civil service and land law system. We have done quite well and we have graduated.

WORLD REPORT: Throughout our interviews with your colleagues in government and with the private sector, we have discovered that there is a general misperception regarding the Islamic community here in Malaysia, which leads to misrepresentation in the foreign press...

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: Indeed, the positives are not reported. Only the few 'outside the arena' happenings are given a lot of exposure. For example, that lady who took some drinks who will now be caned by the system – that is not good. That is, historically, a very perverse situation we have not corrected. The problem is the jurisdiction of the Islamic system is not within the federal system. It is with the various state systems. We cannot simply tell the state not to do that. The state will say this is not your jurisdiction – this is our area. It stems from that. It is also compounded by the fact that Islamic jurisprudence in this country is under the state. Only the federal constituencies are within the grasp and jurisdiction of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Supreme or Paramount Ruler, which under the Constitution is advised by the Cabinet. That incident was widely reported and dispersed all over the world. It depicts us in a very bad light.

WORLD REPORT: Would you say that the '1Malaysia' initiative is one of the measures introduced by the government to improve and help the international community understand Malaysia?

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: You are right. But it is not purely to overcome an esoteric happening like this. It is a very large canopy of policy, which in fact historically emanated from the period after independence. Now we have had six Prime Ministers. '1Malaysia' is trying to create social justice. We do not ask what religion you belong to or whether you are Chinese, Indian or Malay. The other part is social engineering or reengineering, so to speak. Therefore, through education and government you must have the capability to correct on what we have done wrong as well as credit what we have done right. When it comes to Islam it is a tricky business. '1Malaysia' is trying to say to all the Muslims, that we have all been taught by the Book to respect the Jews. We can even marry ladies of the Book in Islam. So, why must we have discrimination in certain things? This is the kind of message that we push through. '1Malaysia' is a canopy of pragmatic policies for us to carry out. Being a government coalition entity, we feel that this is the

answer for the future. With the coming of Internet and broadband, the world is now borderless. We need to be seen as concrete in our approach towards nation building, where the Chinese can feel that they are equally as part of Malaysia as Malays, Indians, Kadazans, Dusuns or the tribes in Borneo. Mind you we have only been independent for 52 years, which is not very long. Therefore with '1Malaysia' we can see the concrete results. Now in government we are introducing the importance of the five principles or Rukunegara; belief in whatever god you believe in, loyalty to country and the Agong, our Supreme Ruler, in your case the Queen, belief in the sanctity of the Federal Constitution, respect for the law of the land and to give due credit and follow the social pattern of all the communities. The five pillars fit in very well with '1Malaysia'. This ministry launched that in February this year and we feel very enthused by it. We would like to be tested and seen by the world through the '1Malaysia' window. Of course, like the beer-drinking lady, that case is like a sore tongue. But I do not think that it, by itself, will dwarf us. We have done so many other things that are commendable to date. Economically we are going up but for now I think we are struggling to attain the 7% gross domestic product (GDP) growth. We are not there yet but I think we could do it within the next couple of years.

WORLD REPORT: Speaking of these five pillars...

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: It is called the Rukunegara.

WORLD REPORT: We understand that the government is also seeking feedback from communities and society itself regarding '1Malaysia' and about whether it is beneficial, and where improvements are needed. Have you received any such feedback?

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: I can report to you now, rather categorically, we have interviewed 12,212 random respondents throughout the country. 68% say that they understand '1Malaysia' and they support it but they also need to see the proof in the future. That is quite all right. It is acceptable. But the other 32% are mostly political hit backs who dismiss this and say it will not work. That we are just using big jargon, they have heard it all before and here we go again. We are quite all right and accept all of these. Therefore slowly the cabinet and the government are creating the programmes. Today is the Chinese New Year, so three nights ago we went to a purely Chinese area.

There was a crowd of about 12,000. This is good proof that '1Malaysia' is coming up. Yes we have got problems and they are saying something to us but let's list out what the problems are such as delays and unequal treatment of business. A few of them have been taken and very physically improved and then we say that we will attend to these issues and the department will call you.

The other one is the SMS that we send out. We have sent out about 262,000 SMS. We got back about 178,000 saying they understand '1Malaysia'. They also ask how we can do things better over in the hinterland of Sabah and Sarawak. We are quite happy and we know where we are. As Information Minister I told the Prime Minister and the Cabinet that we have to develop these areas especially our interconnectivity with rural areas and the regions of Sabah and Sarawak. We must establish the key performing index for achievement this year and next year. Roughly that is how we work out. Now every department has got its own key performing index to achieve. For example for my Ministry of Information, I have to show to the public that more than 50% of Malaysians understand the beauty and goodness of '1Malaysia'. That is one of my key performance indicators (KPIs). Of course in communications and culture they are something else. Every time we have a gathering there will be Malay culture, Chinese representation, music, dance and Indian music and dances.

WORLD REPORT: '1Malaysia' means something to me as a foreigner. As the Minister of Information, Communication and Culture, what does '1Malaysia' truly mean to you?

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: To me we share, the good and bad, and we identify ourselves as Malaysians first. Malay, Chinese or Indian comes second. It is simple. That must be translated into government, cultural programmes, economic wellbeing and whatever we have in the potluck. As you can see the country is largely built by business. Business is largely owned by our Chinese friends. The Malays can now share in this. But when it comes to the debate; you are Malay, you are Chinese and you are Indian. We have to diffuse that and say we are Malaysian first.

WORLD REPORT: We are Malaysian first: I think that is one of the key points we have come to understand. To finalise our brief discussion today, as you know we

are a European publication. We would like to give you the opportunity to give closing remarks addressed to the British public about Malaysia, your ministry and how you would like Britain to understand Malaysia.

YB DATO' SERI UTAMA DR. RAIS YATIM: That is not an easy task but I shall try. We have been built by the British. We are not getting the kind of British treatment that we expect to be given. That is my first opening remark. We have been forgotten. But in hindsight, it is also our fault because we have not made adequate connectivity culturally, diplomatically and trade-wise in the last 25 years. We have been too busy with each set of activities nationally. Therefore reaching out from Malaysia to a friend that has built and administered us must continue. The younger set of British people must begin to understand that Malaysia is actually a very congenial international friend. And in this part of the world we still like to be that way. So whatever opening, I hope the British Prime Minister would be able to open up a vein. For example, what does it mean to be in the Commonwealth? What is so common about the Commonwealth? Nothing. It has not been translated into concrete things. As some of these questions are relevant, perhaps this should be revisited by Britain and regard us as a close friend. We may have made mistakes here and there, but who hasn't? We even see it in Britain everyday in the papers and published in *The Independent*. But we must look forward. I think that for friendship amongst nations, it is better to set it more on a former administrative outpost with the principle than as compared to another country which has no past link at all. History, as Gerald Templer said who came from Britain and who was here a long time ago, is connectivity of time and activity.

WORLD REPORT: Thank you very much for your comments.