

Malaysia: The struggle is a way of life, not a dinner party

Interview with former PSM chief Nasir

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Until his retirement in July 2019, Parti Sosialis Malaysia leader Mohd Nasir Hashim was Malaysia's longest serving political party leader

Most political operatives, especially those who claim to be on the progressive side of issues, always hedge their bets during interviews. Nasir does no such thing. His principles are not the bromides that political operatives spew, but rather borne from decades in the trenches, with very little success on the horizon.

Question: What is your earliest memory of the dysfunctionality of the system and when did you endeavour to attempt to make a change?

Mohd Nasir Hashim: In my early school years, I used to hate politics because it was dirty - and continues to be so.

Later, I realised that the political leaders are the ones who are dirty. Politics is supposed to harness available resources at hand to help people in need to lead a better life.

I soon discovered that those we are supposed to help did not prosper. They developed a subsidy mentality or drowned in the culture of dependency; the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and destitute. Exploitation was legalised and politicians they sucked the poor dry through their blood, sweat and tears.

When I was in the United States, I had high hopes that friends in the social and political sciences, who seemed well versed on socialism and revolution, would lead the way.

I was disappointed, and when I returned, I was on my own. They abandoned the struggle and became armchair intellectuals constrained by self-censorship.

This struggle is not a dinner party, but a way of life.

I was on a scholarship sponsored by the people and so I returned to serve them, and I will react if they or their livelihood is threatened. Those who betrayed the people are too small in my mind's eyes and I will openly confront them.

My philosophy is simple: I will continue to fight, and maybe one day they will gang up and kill me off. So what? That is the price of this beautiful struggle.

What do you consider your most productive achievement as the chief of PSM?

Forming a Socialist Party. It took us 11 years for the government to confirm us as a national political party. We took the government to task and dragged them to the Federal Court. The government called us up on the day of the trial to discuss in lieu of registration.

We are one big family. We decide when to fight or how to fight. We have different levels of leadership during demonstrations so that our actions are not frustrated or stunted when the top leadership is detained.

If they want to negotiate, we negotiate on the basis of strength. If they try to stifle the negotiation, we go back to the streets and expose their hypocrisy.

What have you learnt in your tenure as PSM chairperson?

The family spirit, comradeship and the love of the people as our source of inspiration and the backbone of the national economy. The only way to expose the capitalists who make profit maximisation as their God, is through socialist analysis to expose and strip them to the core.

Could you describe how your role as PSM chairperson, as a prisoner of the state and an independent political operative, has impacted your family?

Being detained for a long period of time does have an impact on the family. Especially so when families at home are constantly harassed by the Special Branch and fed with lies about their loved ones.

They need a family support system to help them through economic, emotional and social hardships. As for those detained, they are confined and have nowhere to go. To some, family visits are rare, it being too far and a financial strain to them. Some children are exposed early to the kind of work their parents do and can manage the heat.

At times they are heckled and jeered in school and come home crying. Divorce and psychological trauma occur. Children may not necessarily follow the footsteps of their parents, but they learn the meaning of discipline, commitment and compassion as they start life on their own.

Can you describe, the circumstances surrounding your detention by the state and what you experienced while detained?

It was tough. I was made a target for being a socialist, an intellectual, a Malay and did not hold a position in PSRM. I was detained a few months after joining PSRM (Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia). My involvement in workers' struggle and my open criticism of the authorities and their cahoots drew flak and was considered dangerous to developers, delinquent unions and authorities.

The first 60 days were bad, but if you know what you want in life, then you can withstand the torments and humiliation every day and night for the next 60 days. They have shifts, taking turns to grill, abuse verbally and break us down as a prelude to confessions.

Of course, tears flowed when I was in the dark corners of my cells, but not in front of them. They will relent if they think they have broken your spirit. I will not criticise those who confessed while in detention, for we do not know how much torture they had undergone.

Confession under duress is not acceptable. I have written a novel, '*Mengharungi Titik Nokhtah*' that describes such episodes. Since I was not wrong and they tried to put words into my mouth, I came out stronger after the detention. In a live TV interview, I stated that I would do the same, even it meant going through another round of ISA detention.

On one occasion I yelled, 'Are you for the rich or the poor?' They thought I was hard-headed. To them, we were already guilty.

There was an occasion the officer was so obnoxious, I said to myself, if I found him outside I would have my fist in his mouth. I was a boxing champion in RMC (Royal Military College) and black belt candidate in US. I met him outside and I just walked away. I had to move on.

I kept my sanity in Kamunting (detention camp) by writing poems (published many years ago), did acrylic paintings on T-shirts for my children, read the Quran (given to me during the 60 days detention in Bukit Aman), read books, did gardening, became an electrician.

Before my friends went on strike and fasted, I, as a nutritionist, prepared written instructions on what to expect and what would happen to their bodies when they fasted so that it would not be too much of a shock to them.

I learned acupuncture from my Chinese friends while in detention. We did barter trading, i.e. I taught them English and they exposed me to acupuncture. When I was released, I learnt acupuncture from a Master for three years, opened a clinic and was in practice for 15 years before becoming the 'wakil rakyat' (state representative) in Kota Damansara.

During your long tenure, how have you encouraged the role of feminism in the PSM discourse?

The rakyat are workers and include all denominations of race, religion, gender, age and culture. We will take on issues pertaining to gender discrimination; safety; industrial disputes of specific people or groups of workers; question the patriarchal system; the sharing of responsibility and house chores.

We must be aware of all forms of discrimination, and we are winning when we address and fight against them.

What has been the most difficult decision you have made as chairperson of PSM?

For health reasons, I am not able to be physically present with the people when they are struggling for their rights. It breaks my heart for I want to be in the midst of their struggle.

I have to deliberately and consciously ease off a bit, or temper my involvement so the young potential leaders have the opportunity to handle situations, create new ideas and direct the charge.

After that, we will do a post-mortem to identify and evaluate our successes and failures. I tell them that they need not follow my suggestions, for they may be obsolete. So they need to analyse with the latest information and seek alternative means (thinking out of the box/paradigm shift). The strength comes from the members and the rakyat.

I experienced something similar when I was the senior under-officer in the Royal Military College in the mid-60s. Before I took over, we were second last among the eight companies. But we became the best company by beating the company seeded to win by a mere one-half point. The team was the same, except for the young batch. It was through their unity and strength that we overcame the odds.

In this part 2 of the three-part interview, retiring PSM chief Mohd Nasir Hashim explains why his party wins hearts, but not elections.

Question: As one of the founders of Parti Sosialis Malaysia, what was the motivation behind creating a left-wing party when left-wing parties over the years have been sidelined from the mainstream political process?

I became a socialist while studying at Cornell University in New York, USA. I was a food technologist and nutritionist (international nutrition), but interested to know about people's struggle for socialism from my Malaysian friends.

Becoming a socialist was an ongoing consciousness process since my early days, and through parental guidance. They may not use the word "socialism", but their actions spoke louder than words. It's as if my innate consciousness was triggered.

I returned to Malaysia to do PhD research and realised that I was especially weak in the field of economics. When I returned to the US to defend my thesis, I found time to do self-study, including studying the works of Karl Marx.

In Malaysia, we formed Insan (Institute for Social Analysis) and published the magazine *Nadi Insan*. Those involved were Jomo K Sundaram, P Ramasamy, Ishak Shari, Rustam A Sani, V Paneer Selvam, Rohana Ariffin and many others, and I was the chairperson. I was further exposed to the plight of the poor masses and had press conferences for the victims to present their cases to the press.

But the people needed more. They wanted us to organise them and later insisted that we be with them when they demonstrated. Some intellectual friends were uneasy with such a move for they preferred to have press conferences and not rock the boat.

We left to join PSRM (Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia), knowing the party was not strong. But we had to see if we could affect change. We knew that the left's struggle was not strong.

The fall of the Berlin Wall reverberated throughout the world and Malaysian socialists decided to drop the label 'socialist' from PSRM, shortening the name to PRM.

This was finalised when I was released from ISA detention. So we left. My contention was that we needed socialism à la Malaysia, not à la Russia, China, Cuba. So I regarded those who left as a filtering process for better socialism.

To create a socialist state is an uphill battle. We need, by stages, to dismantle the mindset of workers and the rakyat, to let them know there is an alternative to capitalism. So, we analysed the capitalist system that robotised humans and mangled the environment. We saw the emerging faces and phases of profit maximisation (maximal exploitation), with speculation and monopolies leading to economic crisis after crisis.

We saw how the capitalists, in the name of providing development, controlled and ganged up with the politicians and government agencies to crush the people, who are workers and the very beings who are the backbone of the national economy and national development. They are our source of inspiration and through them, we will create a socialist state.

Even religious people indirectly supported the exploiters by saying that they should obey the leaders, even when they are wrong. Whereas the Quran urged people to fight against injustice (Quran 4:135).

Some even said that our move to form a socialist party was suicidal, but we have progressed since then.

PSM - at least in social media - is a much “admired” party. Why hasn’t this translated to electoral success?

It is a different ball game. We are not willing to play to their rules. People are convinced that by ousting the incumbent, we will see paradise or feel the euphoria of a new world. It’s not happening.

We continue to empower the rakyat. Initially, we would channel the plight of the rakyat through existing friendly political parties, but they would only take it up if it jived with their political agenda. That was one of the reasons why we decided to participate in elections.

It merely means that we have to work harder to expose the hypocrisy of political leaders and create a situation that is conducive to a change of mindset. This will take a longer time when the so-called ‘progressives’ continue to flirt with race and religion for short-term gains.

Do you think the current electoral system disadvantages independent parties, and if so, how?

The two-party system dismisses other small parties having different approaches to serve society. At present, the modus operandi for the two-party system merely exploits race and religion for political mileage and uses people’s votes to come to power, and soon betrays them. It uses insecurity to breed hatred, suspicion, conflict and to divide our society. They worship vice, power and money, and have nothing to do with the race and religion they are supposed to be championing.

There should be a system whereby the minority has a constitutional say in the Parliament and state assemblies, to participate in and contribute to national development. If not, they will be left in a lurch.

How does a left-wing party like PSM gain traction with middle-class voters - especially non-Malay voters - when (so far) working class issues do not translate to votes?

Our starting point was to empower the poor (B40) exploited masses. We soon realised that the middle group (M40) was also suffering from the increasing cost of living, inflation, housing problems, transport, medical care, etc. Pollution and denudation of hills affect the temperature, climate, cause flash floods and prolonged droughts.

We cannot win over all people overnight and must go in stages to show our capabilities, and do not flirt with race and religion for short-term gains. We will work with NGOs and support their programmes, offer our help and analysis of impending problems

The perception is that PSM is an “Indian” party. Why do you think this perception persists and how do you move beyond labels when PSM has an extremely small voice in the mainstream media and the alternative press?

After I was released from ISA detention, we worked on problems of squatters in the early 1990s. At that time evictions and destruction of properties of squatters were rampant.

I was the chairperson of the Support Committee of Urban Pioneers (Jawatankuasa Sokongan Peneroka Bandar). At that time we had more than 50 villagers in our committee. They were mostly Malays, except for one estate.

We did not allow the authorities and developers to label them as squatters or *setinggan*, for squatters have no rights in court. So we called them urban pioneers because for three generations they developed the land with a promise of permanent housing. We created havoc and since then,

they have been given compensation and alternate housing.

Then it came to our notice that the government was acquiring estate land for industries. If the workers lose their jobs, they also lose their housing. So we shifted gear and moved to estates.

Since then we have more Indian comrades in our team till this day. We are colour blind. We want to be with those who are at risk of losing their jobs and homes.

Recently more Malay youths are joining PSM. It's a good sign.

Why is there hostility between mainstream political parties and PSM?

PSM is not happy with the present system that strives for exploitation and worships profits. It robotises workers, destroys humanity and the environment. We see the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer. The legal system protects the rich, legalises exploitation. They become rich through the blood, sweat and tears of the toiling masses.

We abhor all forms of exploitation or discrimination and will take them to task, even if they are our friends. We prefer cooperation rather than competition/ conflict. We prefer compassion.

We believe that the way to save the country is by empowering the people. We do not appreciate those leaders merely wanting to take over the government, and later use the same administrative modus operandi, which is mere cosmetic.

We want to overhaul the fabric of this exploitative economic system and have economic and social systems revolving around the rakyat, rather than the rakyat revolving around a social economic system.

The poor and workers are our assets, not a liability, and we need to train and harness their skills and energies to develop the country. Success is when the leaders squirm when they see and hear the rakyat articulating the needs of society.

In the final part of this interview, PSM's Mohd Nasir Hashim assesses the performance of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Pakatan Harapan government in the year since GE14.

Question: These days with Islamic parties demonising socialism, how does one reconcile being a good Muslim with being an active socialist?

Religions tend toward justice, truth, compassion and love. The Quranic verse (Al-Qasas 28:5) states: "And We wanted to confer favour upon those who were oppressed/exploited in the land and make them leaders and make them inheritors."

This verse refers to exploited/oppressed workers. God not only blesses/favours the downtrodden exploited masses, but also emphasised that they will be the future leaders and be the guardian or trustees of the wealth of nations/world. This verse is socialistic and revolutionary.

The Quran mentioned that everything is created in pairs (Quran 36:36) that are naturally contradictory, but at the same time complementary to each other (the entire Quranic Surah Ar-Rahman 55), and our job is to balance them so that truth, compassion and justice prevail.

The strength of socialism is to critically analyse the dialectical inter-relationships existing between spiritual and material worlds, and also the intra-relationships within this material world (from slavery to socialism), and within this spiritual world (spirit, soul and lust).

The Quran also stated: "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth" (Quran 41:53). If we want to know truth and justice, we must be fully involved in the communities facing hardships. Then we truly know the meaning of truth, justice and love for humanity.

We must then reflect on such happenings with our innate consciousness and personal experiences, before arriving at the truth and acting upon it for the betterment of society

What kind of Islamic narrative would PSM be advancing if it had influence in Parliament?

As for all religions, justice, compassion, truth, universalism, equality and respecting other races and religions are the *sine qua non* in Islam. The constitutional rights of those born in this country must be respected.

The Quran is regarded as a living miracle, and Muslims should spend more time finding out its evergreen richness.

Post-May 9, what has been the most troubling development in your opinion?

Election promises not fulfilled. Playing the racial and religious game for political mileage. Dragging or shuffling of feet. Contradictory statements from ministries.

The senior members, especially Mahathir, seem not interested to help during the teething administrative period. He is more interested in consolidating the power of his party by recruiting Umno MPs, or he is consolidating his position as the PM, or wants to have a strong say as to who should be the next PM.

The shaky internal conflict within PKR casts a dark heavy shadow on (the prime minister-in-waiting) Anwar (Ibrahim)'s premiership. The gradual loss of confidence of the civil society in the Pakatan Harapan government is disconcerting, and they become more apologetic by reversing their original statement when under pressure.

What do you think of Harapan's progress in reforming the system so far? Where have they made progress and where have they regressed?

It is disappointing, to say the least. It irks me to listen to those who say that since they did not expect to win, they came up with a fantastic election manifesto. In short, they hoodwinked the people who thirst for change.

They have two alternatives, either finetune the system or overhaul the system. If they decide to finetune, then there is a great chance of falling back into the old ways, creating havoc with neo-liberal policies or Mahathirism to cater to the whims of their nepotistic and cronyistic clientele.

If they wish to overhaul the system, they cannot do so because they don't have the philosophical or ideological acumen to make such a move. So they procrastinate, lament and seek scapegoats. Therefore, the best way is to make cosmetic adjustments to the social, political and economic system and declare that they are different from the previous administration.

Most ministers and deputy ministers are my friends and are former activists, but they lost their way (marbles) when they took important positions, as if thoroughly indebted to the one who offered them such prominent jobs, to a point of being feudalistic and subservient to the master.

Their concern should be with the rakyat and if they wish to seek a balance, let it be in favour of the

rakyat. Usually, the big corporate bodies and powerful individuals win because they are able to easily convince the leadership, thus the needs of the rakyat are conveniently sacrificed.

As for PSM, the struggle goes on. We were disappointed, but not enough to cause disarray. We continue to overcome our weaknesses and consolidate our strengths. Seeking alternative ways to reach people.

Do you think Mahathir has changed?

I don't think so. Before the election, I commented that he was too arrogant to apologise. If he did so, it was due to political expediency. When asked why he apologised, his response was that it was a cultural thing to do. He did not specify what he was apologising for.

At his age, it is difficult to change his mindset. If he wants to do so, he has to overhaul his entire philosophy of life.

He has gone back to his old ways by reintroducing his neo-liberal policy, whereby his cronies will be millionaires and billionaires. Yet my activist friends who are ministers and deputy ministers do not seem to care or are merely whimpering.

So Mahathir continues to rule, recruiting Umno MPs to increase the numbers in his party and subtly become a threat to the other component parties of Harapan. Some believe that he is creating a new Umno 2.0 in Harapan.

The multiracial component of his thinking is not there. The country and people will be better off if affirmative action was meant for all races, and periodically evaluated to detect and steer the rakyat left behind by providing ample skills to be self-sufficient.

But this affirmative action for a specific race continues with a change of label. Now it becomes a cheque with no stated amount and with no deadline.

What challenges is the new PSM chairperson going to face?

So far, there is no rivalry among the members. Problems are resolved through discussion. Differing opinions on how to approach the next election exist, and there is consensus on establishing PSM branches in areas earmarked for the coming elections.

PSM will not use race and religion to garner support, but demystify and expose those who abuse them.

The issue of a socialist being anti-religion will be used constantly to downplay PSM's fight for truth and justice. The statement - "Religion is the opium of the masses" - is often quoted out of context. The full quote is: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

People find relief through religion when they are exploited and have no place or alternative to turn to. Furthermore, socialist ideology is not a religion, not deterministic and not economic.

What do you plan to do, now that the mantle has been passed?

I will continue to be with PSM and see it grow stronger under the new leadership to greater heights.

I will continue to write, acquire new skills, marvel at the resilience of our people and the beauty

around us.

I will continue to learn about time-bound consciousness and innate/timeless consciousness, and the dialectical relationship between the spiritual and material world. Quantum physics provide a new dimension of consciousness, reality and against materialism.

Writer's epilogue: It does not matter if you agree with the political stance of PSM. The reality is that eventually the political class, bankrupt of ideas, will reshape the political terrain, where religious extremism will be the currency with which the majority of Malaysians will do political business. But PSM appears to never give up fighting for the rakyat disenfranchised by the system.

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