

**Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad's Speech at ISEAS  
(Institute of Southeast Asian Studies)  
Regional Outlook Forum Luncheon 2012  
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**Malaysian Politics in 2012 and Beyond**

Introduction

Ambassador Kesavapany, Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year. I would like to provide you a little more balance to what might have been otherwise a one-sided picture of Malaysian politics. Umno and PAP have one thing in common. They think politics and the business of ruling belong to them, and to them only. So, let an attitude of give and take prevail.

1. As the general election looms, the possibility of more sensitive issues rising on the horizon may become irritatingly irresistible.
2. Meanwhile, prime minister Najib Razak, has to deal with increasing pressure from competing vested interests that want him to take a particular course of action. There is no doubt Malaysia has changed but political transformation must necessarily be gradual. I do not expect tensions to disappear after the polls.

There is, of course, sometimes something you just cannot prepare for.

3. What you will hear, sadly or otherwise, may surprise you and dismay some. It may be uplifting in the kampong. If you think Malaysia is muddling along you are wrong; it's not withering. We are not gasping for breath! Of course, we could have done much better. There is definitely no guarantee to the permanency of the ruling party. However, Umno, arguably, is in good shape to be re-elected. The question you should be asking me is: how big will the majority be?
4. I have the impression that the Pribumi are seething with secret rage because some Malaysians – in their pursuit of power – are even willing to tear up the constitution to change the present political patterns to capture Putrajaya.
5. It is a common complaint about politics that it has been degraded by a clash of civilisations. But, it's the politics of demography and the economy which hold the key to all election results though meeting the rising expectations, demands and hopes of the people is critical. We will become a really high-

income nation if our governance meets the need of our people.

6. After 55 years of continuous power, Malaysians want their government to create a just, prosperous, harmonious nation: a Malaysia of freedom, fraternity, material welfare, a nation which encourages inclusion, not division and alienation. Like in Singapore, we, too, want to improve education, healthcare and public transportation and carry out policies that will ensure social mobility and inclusive growth that benefits poor and wealthy Malaysians.
7. Malaysian politics, like in neighbouring countries, is all fear-based. It's still race-and-religious based politics. Little has changed. Just look what happened in previously (in 1969) when race-related issues were played out senselessly and with utter disregard of racial, religious sensibilities. All should be mindful of this ever-present danger, just below the surface. I repeat, little has changed. It's still the politics of race and religion.
8. The insecure, less acquisitive and under-achieving Pribumi are alarmed at the prospect of losing power to the accomplished, powerful and wealthier minority. The Pribumi wish to continue defining the

political boundaries and the nature of power that are central to them. One need not be perceptive to recognise that they will defend their political turf, their last bastion, come what may. The big mistake is the group thinking it could continue to subvert the people to achieve its nefarious ambition. Like in Mainland China and Singapore, Malaysians must have the good sense to know what can and what can't be changed.

9. There will be adjustments even changes made when the majority feel they are already out of their political comfort zone, or, a revolution takes place before that. There will be certain times when the Pribumi will have to strike the right balance. They generally do not like confrontation. But they are, I think, prepared to quarrel over issues which they believe had been settled and resolved.
10. The Malaysian economy seems capable of weathering the uncertain external factors. In the near future, it looks bearable. No Malaysian has died of hunger. No Malaysian has set himself alight. We have been blessed to remain relatively prosperous. We may, of course, feel the worsening economic chill at some stage. Malaysia is not an Orwellian Kingdom.

Najib isn't daft. But more importantly Umno/BN will be returned to power because there are no Nelson Mandelas or Gandhis in the Pakatan Rakyat. None of the leaders has Lee Kuan Yew's ethical authority; and his brain power. Worst, it's in disarray.

11. All too often the opposition continues to make blithe comments, sometimes it crows: 'see you in Putrajaya soon'. I am surprised that even the usually sensible politicians are caught in the Putrajaya dream! I may say they are rather confident when the facts do little to support them.
12. The Umno convention has given Najib carte blanche to do what it takes to keep power. Winning the do-or-die polls is stated in stark terms: a jihad. This is because Umno has always claimed that it is the only party that could safeguard, enhance and entrench Pribumi special rights, privileges and special position. The Pribumi, for years to come, are unlikely to welcome policies and ideas which would endanger what they legitimately consider their birthright.
13. They are afraid their special position will be eroded and eventually nullified should the opposition capture Putrajaya. This anxiety has struck a chord with ordinary Pribumi. Up to now, however, I don't believe

there is such a danger. Perhaps, there is a believable exaggeration. Tun Razak and the still-influential Dr Mahathir remain seductively iconic leaders. They stoke a yearning for the good old days when people knew their place.

14. Let me explain this. The notion of Malaysian Malaysia remains simply, historically, politically and constitutionally unacceptable to most Pribumi. Umno was founded 66 years ago to bury the Malayan Union. Malaysian Malaysia is the reincarnation of the hated Malayan Union.
15. In 1965, Tunku Abdul Rahman engineered, and endorsed by Lee Kuan Yew, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Why? It's simply on the account of future demographic politics. The questioning of the settled issues, arrangements and understanding raised the spectre (in Tunku's mind) of huge potential Pribumi political casualties. He told Tun Razak: 'either we potong or amputate Singapore or you take over!'
16. Based on what is happening on the ground and Najib campaigning like a presidential candidate, Umno will win or should win, and with a bit of luck, with a comfortable majority. He will have to learn to live

without a two-thirds majority. I must say though the opposition has never had a more favourable situation to make real headway and their contribution to Malaysian democracy is far from insignificant. A young Umno MP from Johor of Sino-Malay origin, Nur Jazlan Mohamad (Pulai) wrote three weeks ago in *The Edge Malaysia* (21 December 2011). Let me summarise: ‘...even among Najib’s Umno supreme council members some may have come to the conclusion that another occurrence or racial and religious strife is the best way to retain Malay power.’ Perhaps, the MP has read too much into what he heard during the Umno general assembly.

17. Let me say this, it’s preposterous for Pribumi to lose power to the minority Chinese, powerful though they are. What is possible, though not likely, is that PAS may eventually replace Umno. That’s entirely a different proposition. There are only 50 Chinese-majority constituencies out of 222, 120-130 Pribumi majority seats; the delicately balanced-mixed constituencies form the remainder.
18. The trouble or the good thing is that Umno has inculcated in the minds and hearts of Pribumi that Umno and the sons and daughters of the soil are

synonymous. Simultaneously, the belief has also been inculcated that the powerful and wealthy Chinese can make anything happen. Personally, I find it incredulous that anything like that could happen. Unfortunately, however, there are also some Chinese chauvinists who sometimes talk too glibly of that happening. That fuels the inherent fear of the Pribumi. The relentless attacks on Malay institutions and repeatedly questioning the settled issues gives the Pribumi *casus belli*.

19. It is my impression that Umno is pretty secure in the affections of the Pribumi, conservative and business-friendly Malaysians. They prefer the devil they know rather than the angel they don't. Perhaps, I see things as they are. Outsiders may see them differently and often see what they wish to witness. Really, its reality versus perception.
20. Umno/BN still quite firmly holds Johor, Pahang, Sabah, Perlis, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Sarawak, The last state through Taib Mahmud, the *de facto* White Rajah. Penang, Kelantan, Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur are gone. Perak, Kedah and Terengganu remain a toss-up as to who will get there first. If my mathematics is right, Umno,

with the meaningful support/contribution of MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and Gerakan (People's Movement) and other component parties, has more than an edge to romp home in good company.

21. Nevertheless, whatever is the outcome, political Islam is on the rise. PAS hasn't reneged its pledge to establish a Negara Islam or an Islamic theocratic state. The party has only changed its tactic. DAP works with PAS to enable the Islamists to garner Chinese votes so that the Islamists can capture most of the Pribumi majority seats; and with PKR (The Justice Party) to win as many of the mixed-constituencies as possible.
22. Najib will continue to adapt to make Malaysia a meritocracy. He needs a solid mandate to carry the people with him to do that. More importantly, he needs that mandate to carry his own party. If he gets a solid endorsement, it's the beginning of the rise of smart power. So, don't despair. Celebrate. For sure, Najib will stop Malaysia falling further into mediocrity, interrupt/stop corruption and cronyism. He will, hopefully steer the government towards governance. The voters should give Najib the benefit of doubt

because there is good reason not to complain too much about Malaysian politics. It tends, however painfully, to eventually solve itself.

23. From my personal perspective, I am optimistic political transition will take place. All this leaves Najib with much work to do this year.
24. Despite sometimes UMNO is its own worst enemy, and what people say about him and his family, my intuition is that 2012 will be Najib's Annus Mirabilis.
25. Thank you.

Kuala Lumpur, Wednesday 4 January 2012