WHO READS THE writing on the wall? And what can they do about it?

Who, in the first place, is doing the writing?

Umno, the dominant party in the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition, has come under withering criticism of different kinds, from within and without the party following the collapse of the BN in the March 8 general election last year. As at the time of writing, the BN has lost all seven by-elections it has contested since then.

So much of the blame has been laid at Umno’s door; for its systematic corruption, and the chauvinist ideology that is grist for its mill; and the rampant warlords who put paid to the fortunes of Umno’s main coalition partners, MCA and MIC, with their ‘pendatang’ demagoguery and palaces in unlikely places.

That, however, is the view from outside. From within, from amid the cacophony of a political corporation faced with a bankruptcy of ideas, influence, power and wherewithal, the outlooks can be quite different – depending on whom you ask. Off The Edge speaks with five Umno members, not one above thirty-years-old. In the next few pages is a somewhat intense and revealing conversation.

Some broad observations: obviously, the need for a different kind of politics is touched on. Would this, or could this be one that was non-racial in nature, where ethnic identity is not destiny? Or is the instinct for groupism stronger and more real than any notion of liberal humanism?

As noted by the Nobel laureate for medicine, Konrad Lorenz, humans club together so tightly as to fail to recognise those outside the group as human, thus overriding any injunction not to kill their own kind. Indeed, is liberal humanism even natural, as seems to be the contention by some of the five young Malaysians here?

Is Umno and its coalition partners whose qualifying criterion for membership is ethnicity or religion, the result of the Malaysian community (communities?) itself being inherently divided – in mind, body and spirit – by ethnicity?

Perhaps the question should not be if Umno can be reformed, but whether it is the Malay community that can. This view, of course, seems the politically incorrect one, especially given the tectonic shift of March 8, 2008. While prosaic
reasons for the crashing defeat can be given (incompetence, mistake, accident, corruption, etc), the truth probably encompasses unintended consequences, human nature, collective wisdom, and trends that we do not yet see.

The crisp cultural commentator, Neil Postman, writing about language and aliteracy, likened language to the human brain in its inability to see its own bastardisation and even to adapt to its self-mutilation as ‘not a problem’ – the human brain has no pain receptors. Could one say the same of Malaysian politics and the political system? That it has fed and bred formidable interest groups as much as groupism can be said to be innate?

Somewhere in the conversations in these pages is an observation about the ten non-Malay billionaires in this country being proof positive that the NEP works for all. More revealingly, it shows up the limitations of the current political discourse that, couched in emotive ethnic terms, militates against different kinds of questions that we could ask of, and about, Malaysian society.

More than sixty years after Umno was the umbrella movement that prevented the rights of the Malays from being signed away to the British, we speak with some young, direct inheritors of the party legacy. In no particular order, meet Wan Firdaus, Najmie Noordin, Khatijah Rahmat, Ari Zulkarnain, Shahril Sufian. Edited excerpts:

What kinds of questions do we formulate – our own questions – for a new and different generation of Malaysians, for a country to call our own? If you had to ask questions of the country now, what would those questions be?

Shahril: I think it’s been the same questions for quite a while. I’ve come to the realisation that they aren’t necessarily the right questions to be asked at this point because we’ve always seen things almost in a binary opposition – as one extreme against the other. There’s never been an approach to encompass a variety of different views under one roof.

But that’s why I support Umno, because I think it’s a party that can, even if remains an ideal [at this point], be an umbrella organisation to encompass the views of all Malays and all Malaysians. And I think the question should be about how we survive in an environment where we have multiple identities, where things aren’t that clear; those grey issues have never really been addressed.

From where do you think we draw that sense of a Malaysian identity? Our politics shapes the way we see ourselves and, Umno, the whole BN structure – the nature of Malaysian politics – has had a large influence in how we see ourselves. The identity of ‘Malay’, for example, has been a very controlled one, so much so that it’s very difficult to see the multiplicity of identities within the rumpus Malay.

Najmie: You could say that, but I also believe it’s important to see that Umno is still relevant; it has survived because it is a reflection of the civic realities.

Wan Firdaus: And this is where I think the liberal commentators have always been wrong; they like to say that because of party politics, the society is divided. I’m saying the parties are racially-based because the community wants it so. The community, as it is, is racially divided.

Which comes to the question: why do they then support [racially] mixed parties like Keadilan, for example? I think this is where the analysis has not been very thorough. Keadilan benefits from the fact that Umno is corrupt, or seen as corrupt. The Malay community now, some of them have a choice in voting a party which supposedly supports Malay issues, but is corrupt, or a party which does not say it supports Malay issues, but most of the party members are Malays, and says that it is not corrupt – which is Keadilan.

I think the bigger question for Malaysian politics in the next twenty-five years is this: if and when Keadilan or the Opposition comes to power on the basis of corruption [in Umno], but are still racially divided themselves – even if Keadilan and DAP say that they are non-racial, and there is no more corruption on both sides, which parties would the community choose if the community remains as it is today? I’m of the belief that they will go back to racial politics because, at the end of the day, it is not the racial parties that influence whether we are Malay first or Malaysian first. I think it is the community that does.

Ari: What questions would be asked of Malaysia? Both sides of the aisle aren’t really talking about issues that matter to the common people: the healthcare system, the education system, crime and its causes [which are always publicly discussed in] developed countries.

What we need to ask, for our country, is to ask our leaders: what is that you are ‘fighting’ for us? Because when you [focus on civic issues], you have less time for race politics.

Otherwise, you fall back on ideology. If we took a step forward, we’ve taken two steps back now; before, we didn’t hear so much about ‘Malay rights’, that wasn’t the spirit that was burning Umno. But now, there isn’t someone who is saying, I’m going to win the election because I have better policies than that party, not because my education and healthcare system is going to ensure that the future generation of this country makes it’. The questions we need to ask are not about racial stuff, but general stuff that affects everyone.

Wan Firdaus: And politicians on both sides of the divide must be blamed for that. They know that it is not popular to talk about issues in the way Ari has mentioned ...

[For example], Pakatan Rakyat does not have a shadow cabinet up until today. As a matter of fact, when I speak to my Pakatan Rakyat friends, I say to them, Look, you don’t even have a shadow cabinet. Maybe Anwar Ibrahim wants to have a last-minute style announcement ten days before elections, but at least there has to be a spokesperson on behalf of Pakatan to speak on education. You can’t have Pas person talking one thing about education, a DAP person talking one thing about education, and a Keadilan person talking one thing about education.

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FORBES’ TOP 40 RICHEST MEN IN MALAYSIA, 2008

1. Robert Kuok
USD 10 billion, 84, married, eight children. Kuok Group, Pacific Carriers Ltd, Transmile Group, Wilmar International

2. Ananda Krishnan
USD 7.2 billion, 70, married, three children. Maxis Communications, Aircel Ltd, Astro All Asia Networks

3. Lee Shin Cheng
USD 5.5 billion, 69, married, six children. IOI Group

4. Teh Hong Piow
USD 3.5 billion, 78, married, four children. Public Bank

5. Lee Kim Hua & family
USD 3.4 billion, 79, widow, seven children. Genting Group

6. Quek Leng Chan
USD 2.4 billion, 67, married, three children. Hong Leong Group, Guoco Group, Rank Group

7. Yeoh Tiong Lay and family
USD 2.1 billion, 78, widow, seven children. YTL Corporation

8. Syed Mokhtar Albukhary
USD 1.8 billion, 56, married, five children. Malaysia Mining Corporation (MMC), Malaysia Johor Port, Malakoff, Gas Malaysia

9. Vincent Tan
USD 1.3 billion, 56, married, 11 children. Berjaya Group

10. Tiong Hiew King
USD 1.1 billion, 78, married, four children. Rimbunan Hijau Group, Tri-M Technologies
Wan Firdaus:
One thing I always say to touch do for the rest of the country? ‘personal touch’. What does ‘personal something as seemingly superficial as it’s the same in Umno, where it could be mature because it is not focused on issues.

Najmie:
It’s because they can’t agree rather our politics be based upon intra and inter ethnic diversities, liberal’. I am greatly cynical of grand theories and narratives that upon my father’s relatively successful venture into business.

Alam, after which the family moved to more affluent Damansara businesswoman. Mother comes from a middle-class Chinese family from Jasin, Melaka. Both my parents do not have tertiary education. My mother teaches music and my father is a businessman.

I spent my first eight years in a two-room, low-cost flat in Shah Alam, after which the family moved to more affluent Damansara upon my father’s relatively successful venture into business. As labels go, I would describe myself as a ‘postmodern Melayu liberal’. I am greatly cynical of grand theories and narratives that claim to encapsulate the Malay and Malaysian experience; I would rather our politics be based upon intra and inter ethnic diversities, embracing the differing and sometimes paradoxical (but never necessarily contradictory) forces that make up both our individual and collective political identity.

By the same token, the Malay struggle is not something I am ashamed to say I embrace. I identify myself as a Malay more than I do as a Chinese, and I believe it is possible – and perhaps even desirable – to base one’s political perspective on communal interests, which must be made to exist in tandem with a larger and equally legitimate national agenda. As far as I am concerned, this postmodern thought of identity-reconciliation has never been adequately pursued in Malaysia.

Modernity was the era of either/or – Malay or Malaysian, Liberal or Conservative, bumiputra or pendatang, pro-ISA or anti-ISA, give all or don’t give at all, Zaid Ibrahim or Ahmad Ismail. But I hold that Malaysia has moved to a postmodern domain; our politics will gradually reflect that.

ROLE MODELS
My boss, Khairy Jamaluddin. Without overstating it – because I know it won’t get me a raise anyway – I can confidently say he embodies why I still have faith in the promise of Umno. Naturally, yes, as a role model he is very important to me. His story tells me that reform from within is possible – I can be liberal, critically examine sacred cows and stay true to my fundamental political beliefs, yet still make it in Umno.

Tony Benn: whenever I think I’m losing myself in this web of Umno politics, I listen to his old speeches to reel me back in. At my core, I will always be Left. Hidup Labour!

WHY UMNO?
I joined Umno because I believe it can be, and not necessarily what it is. Umno was ruined by years of narrow communalism under a leader whose definition of Malay nationalism was to defeat the evil Chinese ‘other’, and excluded the idea of embracing the diversity of the populace. To me, the said leader wanted most to assimilate non-Malays, and used their (justified) refusal to do so as an excuse to perpetuate confrontational racial politics - and this bred the Umno that most know today.

Umno can and must position itself as a leader, and not a mere hegemon that manipulates and coerces. To lead, Umno must become more national than it has been for the past thirty years or so. Umno must find a way to make its members think Malay and Malaysian.

I joined Umno because I believe it can and do these things. The Opposition parties do not appeal to me because they seem bent on creating a new Malaysia that is divorced from its past. Instead of basing change and reform on the unsaid political understanding struck from the birth of this nation, they propagate a rupture from our history by elevating all that is wrong with this country above all that is right with it. As I see it, their political aim is for a revolution (which, by the way, is easier because it just strips everything away); Umno’s reform – if it gets its act together – is more evolutionary, and thus more apt to Malaysia today.

Najmie: It’s because they can’t agree among themselves. All these problems that we talk about are a reflection on our political thinking, which is not yet mature because it is not focused on issues. We’re not under any illusions about that; our political thinking, which is not yet mature because it is not focused on issues.

at least us here, agree that Umno is not perfect. But I rarely see my Pakatan friends say that they’re not perfect, that they may not be ready to be government. Because their argument is that we in government now are just so corrupt and so bad. That is their platform.

We rarely bash them, to be fair. I would usually bash Umno more … For them it’s not necessary to come up with a [policy] solution because we’re ‘just so bad’.

Najmie: That’s arrogant as well, the way I see it. A lot of times we tend to talk in this way; ‘us’ against ‘them’.

But back to your initial point about Malaysia, I think we are at a crossroads right now. A lot of things are happening at once, where you see the old culture [mixing] with the new culture, and this is where the adaptation in our politics is taking its time. But on their side, the Opposition are saying that, fundamentally, policies can’t be changed if you first don’t change certain things, such as race-based politics, for example. They are saying that if I can’t choose the best people to lead the police force, regardless of race, I can’t implement
that policy. And if I can’t choose the best teachers because of racial politics...

Which one comes first? They are arguing that if you can’t solve that problem first, of choosing people based on race, then you can’t solve the other issues, for example, corruption. That’s how I see their argument.

On my part, what I see right now, on the ground, is that there seems to be very differing views from one group of people, who are very much liberal in their interpretation of Malay rights; and people who are actually scared; I go to Alor Setar, and they are scared because they don’t have a clear picture of what the future holds for them. Even now, when their rights are ‘protected’, they say that, ‘I’m not doing that well, I’m still economically behind. What happens when everything becomes liberalised? Where are my school kids going after this?’ That is where you see racial posturing. Society is so divided right now; there is no common goal, and people have different aspirations. That is fundamental.

Where is our thought at this moment? Who decides what moves Malaysia forward? Even our definition of what Malaysia is, is so different from other people’s. And who says that Malaysia needs a definition? Why do we have to have one unifying culture? Definitely, our composition, our demographics does not support the idea of a single kind of value that we can hold.

Khat: We are diverse, different races having different standing in the economy. Look, race is relevant and, yes, we are all on uneven footing. How do we talk about this without sounding racist or going the opposite end of sounding like a liberal? It’s come to the point where if you’re an Umno member, it’s difficult.

Unfortunately what is the jump people make psychologically when you talk to them about these things? When you want to defend your own race, if you’re Malay, you’re a racist. We’re here as Umno members; unfortunately that’s the baggage we carry.

Ari: When Umno assembly people say the only thing we’re fighting for is to protect Malay rights, I think some of the old guards, if I may say so, have it slightly wrong. There’s a difference between defending your rights, and making sure your race moves forward. What Najib has done so far, if it is to strengthen your race, is to allow us to compete. That’s totally different from defending your rights.

The Malays, the argument goes, are not really fluent in the language of business, that’s what they normally say back in Malacca [at my Umno division]. So we need these rights because we’re not the same, we can’t compete with certain other races because they control the supply chain and whatnot.

But I do recognise we are not all equal; your background and genes have an effect on you as a person and how you perform in the classroom. We should not ignore that there are parts of society which are far behind, we should help them out.

But we have never denied people of opportunity. If you work hard, you can make it big and ten billionaires in Malaysia, if I may use this, are not Malays (nine, actually; see sidebar on page 41). But Umno should be there not to defend the right, but to strengthen the race.

PERNIAGAAN POLITIK
Firdaus: On this ‘strengthening our race’ thing, I think most Malay politicians are not honest about it. Because at the end of the day, as a politician, you’re more inclined to do things in a way to defend the quotas and the system because you benefit from doing so. There is a certain group of Malay people who knows that by maintaining the status quo, they will keep on becoming rich...

Their livelihoods [and lifestyles] depend on it.

Firdaus: Correct. At the same time, I would also say the reason why there are possibly a lot of Chinese billionaires, for example, is because they are under more pressure. I’m of the belief that if the Malays are under the pressure of competition, naturally they will do better.

Khat: Whatever arguments you pose as an Umno member doesn’t emerge from a vacuum. It’s difficult to talk about whether Malaysia will be competitive or not when you’re in the position of Umno.

Are you saying that you compromise on equality when you speak as an Umno member?
Ari: No, we don’t compromise... We are young; we may have different views than the current people; the division chiefs, the Youth chief...

When I say yes to equality, what I’m really saying is that I want it to be fair, because I believe that we’re not all the same. But to Umno, we say that we ensure your kids succeed not by promising scholarships but by promising smaller classrooms [for example].

You’re not advocating for a quota system more than for policies that are well-thought through, effective and will actually benefit the people...

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**DO UMNO’S PROPOSED REFORMS FOR ITS PARTY STRUCTURE GO FAR ENOUGH?**

**UMNO’S PROPOSALS**

- 80 percent of 191 UMNO divisions have agreed to discuss party constitution amendments that will end the voting quotas for candidates for the Umno Supreme Council.
- The former practice of having 2,500+ representatives decide on the Supreme Council positions is to be changed.
- New system will either take the form of 60,000 representatives at the divisional level or via direct election involving more than three million members at the branch level.
- New system to be discussed in October and is to be implemented in time for the 2011 Supreme Council elections.
- Another suggestion is to have Supreme Council elections once every three years instead of five, which is the current practice.

**TENGKU RAJALEIGH HAMZAH’S PROPOSALS**

- The president, deputy president, vice presidents and members of the supreme council to be elected directly. This ends the delegate system.
- State party chiefs to be elected by the membership at state level, not appointed by the president.
- The nominations quotas to be abolished.
- Parliamentary candidates to be nominated by their divisions, not by the party president.
- Top office holders in the party to refrain from holding top government positions. This is to separate party politics from the responsibilities of government.
- Office holders in the party should concentrate on strengthening and improving the party. Members of the cabinet, selected from among the party’s members of parliament, should focus on national priorities.

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**AIMS OF PROPOSALS**

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- Gauge better the grassroots sentiment.
- Reduce the involvement of candidates in money politics.
- Reduce Supreme Council post tenure to ensure capable candidates who might otherwise not be eligible due to their age can lead the party.
- Decentralise power in Umno, and make it a grassroots-driven party again.
- Restore democracy to Umno, and thereby its legitimacy.
- Make Umno accountable, and thereby more responsive to its members and the rakyat.
- Separate Umno’s internal political processes from the service we perform to the nation in government.
- Open the doors to young people of talent and energy, thereby revitalising the party and giving it a future.
MOHAMMAD NAJMIE BIN NOORDIN, 26, runs his own business. He attended SRK Sri Subang Jaya (SS14), and SMK Subang Utama, (SS18). Here, in his own words, is his experience of his schooling then, and more:

CASUAL OBSERVATION
Malays, Chinese, Indians – we all shared the same table during recess, and everyone mixed around well. I was, for want of a better phrase, a liberal guy.

At Mara University of Technology reading law, I learned that there’s another part of Malaysia that we don’t really see, having lived in urban Subang all my life. I realised that for some, 2As for SPm is a tremendous accomplishment... You could say that I re-discovered my roots here - music, movies, culture... I was too Westernised before, but UiTM kind of balanced things out for me, and for that I was eternally grateful to the institution, despite all its obvious flaws.

WORK
Tried law. Didn’t enjoy it. Couldn’t see a future in it, is joined the corporate world for experience with Maxis under its Management Associate programme. Proud to be first UiTM graduate, and first social science graduate, to have been accepted. Had a wonderful, muhbbah time at a truly great Malaysian company - it’s as 1Malaysia as you can get. Served for one and half years in various capacities before leaving to take over the family business. Always had it planned, just that the timing was expedited due to my father wanting to relax and fish and my wife delivering my first son. I’m now running a network marketing company that specialises in health and nutritional products. With 50,000 registered distributors all over Malaysia and most of them predominantly Malay-bumiputra, I’m in a unique position to actually listen to what they’re saying.

FAMILY
Born in Penang to parents who are also both from Penang. My mom is actually mixed Chinese-Malay, with my maternal grandmother being a pure Penang Hokkien while my maternal grandfather, a retired army officer turned businessman, was from a mixed Pakistani-Malay family.

My father has some Thai blood in him, but it goes back a few generations. His father was a police officer, but my father was brought up by his grandfather, who was a headmaster at a school in Kubang Semang, Permatang Pauh.

My parents met while studying at University Malaya; my father did medicine, while my mom did law. Both served with the government before; my father was the Head of Sports Medicine with NSC (National Sports Council) while my mom was previously a Sessions Court judge in KL. Father left the service in the mid-Nineties to start his own consulting business (specialising in health and wellness corporate programmes). He did well until he was diagnosed with cancer, about the time I finished my SPm (hence, I decided to continue studies locally). He recovered strongly, and discovered his first product – a self-healing water filtration system. That’s how the company started, and that product continues to be our main driver till today.

ROLE MODELS
I don’t really study politicians like some of my peers do – I prefer successful businessmen to politicians as role models. However, when I was growing up, and even now when I look back at it, I can’t help but be awed by Tun Mahathir. He had his vision, he had his cause, he had his beliefs which were unshakeable. More importantly, I was proud of him and what he did for the country. I think people have been a bit unfair, at this juncture, with hindsight, in criticising him as much as they are doing right now.

Of the current crop, my respect for Dato’ Seri Najib (Razak) is slowly but surely increasing by the day. I mean, he has taken bold steps that may be unpopular with some of my peers, but it will help us in the long run. There is clarity and focus in his administration. He has been firm yet accommodating. I’m genuinely shocked at how well he has done, considering the baggage that he’s carrying.

Is it important to have role models? Not really. It’s more important to believe in something rather than someone.

WHY UMNO?
Well, let’s take this step by step. First of all, I believe that our society is still divided along ethnic lines. That will slowly but surely blur as the country moves forward, but at this juncture of our political maturity, we all think in terms of our own ethnicity.

Next, because we all still think along those lines, I believe that the Barisan Nasional platform is the most suitable to promote and safeguard the respective interests of the different ethnic groups. I think we’ve all forgotten how to listen to one another, and that is the failure of the BN – not in its political framework, but more in how it has gone about [employing] it. In essence, with the right people, and with the right intentions, it is a far superior system as opposed to a non-race based party for Malaysia, at this moment.

Finally, within Barisan Nasional, Umno is the only party with the mission of empowering the Malays. That message may have been lost in the midst of all the corruption, but it is still the only party with the specific goal of empowering the Malays. And as I believe that we all still think along racial lines, then it is a natural choice to choose a party that promotes the interest of Malays.

I agree that we could have done better, with the resources that we have, and the political will that we had, to actively improve the lives of the Malays. I also agree that we could have been more aware of the plight of the other races, and we should actually engage the other parties to ensure that they’re doing their part in the coalition.

But I disagree if we were to say that empowering the Malays means weakening the other races. I think that’s an unfair, and even careless, conclusion. I sincerely believe that the empowerment and betterment of the Malays will lead to a better and prosperous Malaysia for all.

I wish to point out that I am not an Ultra-Umno supporter. I don’t support the party as much as the message or its reason for existence. I’m pretty open to considering other political views. Which leads me to this, my other, more obscure reason, why I choose Umno.

I genuinely don’t believe in the other parties. Some may claim to be non-racial (eg DAP) but have you ever seen them helping out the Malays? I don’t trust the Keadlian platform because I believe it is still personality-driven. I am not a hypocrite, nor am I a Muslim fundamentalist, so I can’t join Pas. What other alternatives are there?

To be completely honest, I’ve said before that we should all just form a new, truly democratic party that encompasses all that is good about BN but without the baggage and legacies. Maybe we should all compete as independents...
Ari: ...and also how we tell them this has to be in a way that does not upset them, because let’s say we’re running for Youth Chief in 2011 and I’ll just chop off my head before I get there. And that’s what happens a lot of the time.

Firdaus: Not only in Umno, to be fair, and this goes back to my point: racial issues [are popular] across all communities. In my opinion, if there is one thing which all parties should sit down and agree on, it is about how to slowly change these prejudices of every community.

So, we’re proceeding on a premise that demographically, race does matter. Is possible for us to have our ethnic identities without it being part of the political equation?

Shahril: It’s been completely necessary. I think we must be bold enough [to acknowledge this]. Whenever we talk about race, and its place in politics we immediately appear as being extreme and out of touch. But what I think is really out of touch is to ignore that race plays a significant part in your identity, and in identity politics as well.

Your ethnic identity doesn’t have to be a big deal, does it?

Shahril: It doesn’t have to, but it doesn’t have to be not. When political parties like PKR and DAP harp on the claim that they are not racially based, what they are trying to imply is that Umno is out of touch and is old politics, because it is based on race. What I’m trying to say is that it’s okay to be based on race. As if, if the BN formula was still there, then our politics would never advance.

GOING DEEP

Najmie: I don’t know why, but I tend to like to think on the other side of the fence first before I think on my side. On their part, they are saying that whatever policy that they want to effect a change in requires a deeper change in terms of the political system first. And I would be very afraid if we were to argue based on policies because they would say that you’ve had forty, fifty years of trying to make things right and there are still a lot of things that no one should take twenty years to improve, such as the public transportation system.

I totally agree with Ari here. When it comes to policies, we are lacking on both sides of the fence. We can argue about them and their political manifesto and whatever but even when we can campaign, we don’t argue on policies, do we? We talk about the other side, but we don’t do the same thing.

Firdaus: Exactly, those are not party policies. Najmie has a good point. We can say status quo is our policy...

Ari: When I read Suara Keadilan or Harakah or Rocket or whatever to gauge what they think of [government policies], there isn’t a single thing. If you want to govern tomorrow, at least show what you can do. If they argue on policy I guarantee you there’ll be a much better Malaysia because then Barisan Nasional really has to [respond in kind].

Najmie: I agree to a certain extent. Before, the thinking was, if Barisan lose the election, things are going to go haywire; these people have no experience in governing, I hate to admit it, but it’s been one year and, “I’m still alive and kicking in Selangor…”

Ari: Let me just say that there’s a difference between state and federal governance.

Najmie: Fair enough. But the policies will come, that’s their argument. The policies will come when they are in power.

Firdaus: People are going to say, ‘We would rather have no policy than corruption.’

Ari: I doubt there’s no corruption, they’re not whiter than white anymore.

Firdaus: No, no, mass corruption. But I think this is what’s going to happen. I truly believe that it is not sustainable for any political party to be in power for more than fifty years; they are just bound to be corrupted. Even PAP (People’s Action Party), the Singaporeans would possibly decide at some point as well that, ‘Okay, why not change?’ Because change is something intriguing. Curiosity killed the cat, by the way. Kuomintang was changed, the Congress Party was changed.

Shahril: But we don’t want change by default; change for the sake of changing.

Firdaus: That’s true. Of course, if Umno manages to adapt to the so-called dynamic, I’m sure we’ll go on. But I’m just saying, you know that as a political party, as a machinery, we’ve run the country for fifty-two years. The max that I would give us is probably sixty, and really, that’s pushing it.

At the end of the day, let’s also talk about how does Umno change. Change would
At the age of 10, my family moved to Subang Jaya, and this was a crucial point in my life as I would now enter a truly MALAYSIAN primary school. Malay, Chinese, Indian, Punjabi, Serani, they were all there in my class.

At the age of 13, I was sent to Sekolah Menengah Agama Persekutuan Kajang, an Islamic boarding school. It was 100 percent Malays and even the teachers, all 120 of them, bar two Chinese and one Indian. The girls they all wore tudung, and in class we were separated, boys on one side, and girls on one side! Coming from Subang Jaya, I found this shocking at first. We were even told not to speak to girls, and there was to be a distance of two metres from them if you urgently needed to talk to them. It was just utterly ludicrous. But my 5 years in SMAP Kajang was a wonderful experience, and it helped to shape me to become an Islamist, in the sense of my attachment to the so-called Islamic struggle for the ummah, or worldhood of Islam. It also helped me to understand the psyche of the Malay Islamist, and to a larger extent, the Malay crowd coming from the various Malay cities and kampung from around Malaysia; my friends came from cities as far as Arau and Kota Bharu, Kuching and even Lahad Datu.

After finishing SPM, I made the ‘mistake’ of enrolling at a private college in downtown KL to do my A-levels. It was certainly not the best A-levels school around. But what was interesting was that, I suddenly found myself for the first time ever, to be the minority in my own ‘country’. I remember my first introductory class of almost 300 students, and I was the only Malay boy, and there were two Malay girls (both of whom were KL people). For the first time, I met Chinese who had attended Chinese schools, and the one-and-a-half years I spent there really shaped my views on the dimensions of the Chinese and Indian community, which was different and certainly larger in number than the so-called bananas and coconuts of the English-speaking Chinese and Indians of Subang Jaya!

I then went on to read law in Nottingham. My overseas education allowed me to learn more about British politics, get myself involved in the Labour Party and the National Union of Students, which gave me invaluable experience on how Malaysia should have been or should be.

**FAMILY**

I am Kelantanese Malay to the roots. My father’s family is from Rantau Panjang, Kelantan, and my mother’s family is from Tanah Merah. We don’t speak Malay or English at home. We only speak Kelantanese! I would say my upbringing has always been very conservative in nature, albeit political. Conservative in the sense that you do not talk about sensitive issues concerning race, religion, or any other taboos openly.

It is quite surprising for me to be quite open in my views despite my Malay family and attending a sekolah agama. But my education in Subang Jaya, in private college, and in the UK (Nottingham and London) certainly influenced me in many other ways too.

**FAMILY AND POLITICS**

My political journey started early, as my grandfather, grandmother, father, and even my mother, they were all very politically active. My grandfather worked for Tun Razak as an officer in Kelantan, but he was always a Pas person. My grandmother on the other hand, was a staunch Umno wanita, being the secretary of Wanita Kelantan at one point. My father was Umno too, but my mom always voted Pas. So our dinners, lunch, raya, kenduri, it was always everyone talking about politics.

After the 1987 Umno General Assembly, my father followed Tengku Razaleigh and joined Semangat 46. Because of this, I had always thought since I was a boy that Mahathir was wrong, and Umno Baru is not the same as Umno lama :) This is reflected why, although Semangat 46 went back into Umno in 1996, we were still a rebellious lot inside Umno itself. And because we were in Semangat 46, we never liked Anwar (Ibrahim), as he was one of those siding with Mahathir in 1987. It was an interesting year for Umno.

So my being in Umno is a rather natural choice as my family was a strong influence. But now, when people ask me why I’m in Umno, I would like to say that it is because there is a need to understand and shape a larger part of the Malay community.

**ROLE MODELS**

Because my father was a staunch Ku Li fan, I always thought of him as something of a role model, and I like to think that he was the best prime minister that Malaysia never had. Maybe I’m biased because I’m Kelantanese, and we Kelantanese are very clannish. When I was in Sekolah Agama, my other role model was Tun Daim from June 2005 to October 2006. He is also a founder and director of the Malaysia Think Tank London (malaysiathinktank.org.uk). Well-travelled and an active debater in student life, he certainly influenced me in many other ways too.

**EDUCATION**

At the age of 10, moved to Tok Uban, Kelantan, a kampung in a daerah called Pasir Mas. Went to school in SRK Sultan Ibrakim (1), ‘where the only non-Malay in the whole school that I can recall was a Punjabi boy and his sister.’

In his own words:

I then went on to read law in Nottingham. My overseas education allowed me to learn more about British politics, get myself involved in the Labour Party and the National Union of Students, which gave me invaluable experience on how Malaysia should have been or should be.
Key for Umno, and why the Malay race is important, is this: it needs to reassure this majority that things will be okay, while convincing the Malays of the need to strengthen [themselves to compete globally]. [Decades] down the road, maybe race might not matter but because the Malays now are still the majority race, and race is an issue for them, politicians will have to react.

Najmie: I have to say that sounds a lot like old-school Umno, and I’m not saying that’s wrong.

Khat: Even if you remove racially based parties tomorrow it’s not going to change the attitudes of the Malays automatically. The reality is, race is an everyday exercise that we all do.

Are there different grades of bumiputra? There’s East Malaysian native bumiputra, Eurasian bumiputra, there are Chinese converts. There is Arab-Malay, Pakistani-Malay...

Firdaus: To tell you the truth on this one, I would honestly say the point is Islam. If you’re Muslim – Chinese-Muslim, Arab-Muslim, Pakistani-Muslim, Filipino-Muslim – you can join Umno. That’s what you see.

Underlying the debate on identity is not just race, but also religion. What roles do imam play? That’s why I keep coming back to the community [factor]. What do you hear when they give sermons or khutbah? What does the mufifi say about things that are different?

So then the debate is whether this country is a secular or an Islamic country. I know a lot of my non-Muslim friends are not happy when politicians on both sides, Pakatan and Umno, say that this is an Islamic country. But of course Umno does not say that it wants to implement hudud.

Najmie: Umno does not want to have hudud.

But the PM has come out to say that it is an Islamic country.

Najmie: They use the term to appease the electorate. It’s about votes, simple as that. But try as they might to interpret the term, this is not an Islamic country.

Firdaus: This question of Islam is the question that our generation has to sort out. The problems of the current generation, I would say, are the so-called easy problems: corruption, messed-up public transport; these you can solve by knuckle-downing and just doing the right thing, such as making sure government contracts are awarded correctly. But whether or not this is an Islamic country?

Let’s go to the most important question: the umbrella of Islam in this country, the sultans. I know some people question why taxpayers’ money should go to the sultans. These are questions that go to our identity.

IS THAT WRONG?

Looking at the legacy that previous generations of politicians have left us, there is quite a lot to work through.

Firdaus: I think when liberal people say that old people have left us with these legacies, it implies that it’s a wrong thing that we have to change. A lot of so-called a bit more right-wing Malays will not be happy with that. In their point of view, [what is] has always been the case [from] before these fifty-odd years of Merdeka.

Najmie: You can’t blame politicians and political parties for everything...

Obviously not. I should make myself clear: you get the sort of government that you deserve but there’s no denying that the system that has been put into place is the default system. It doesn’t have to be the system that we have to accept. The question is, what do you want to change in Umno?

Najmie: How many hours do we have?

(laughter)

Ari: It’s how you elect someone to be a delegate (at the Umno General Assembly and elections), how you elect the president and the deputy president.

The proposed party reforms (see sidebar) mean that 2,500 or so delegates are not necessarily going to be the people who determine the party leadership anymore. Is that going far enough for you?

Shahril: The fundamental change would be for Umno leaders to be bold enough to bring the party back to the centre where it rightly belongs. It shouldn’t be the default position that Umno is on the right.

Firdaus: To move Umno centre-right, Umno leaders and Umno as a whole must have an honest and non-racial policy on Malays. What do I mean by that? Honest, meaning we need to have a policy where, for example, we want to build the best schools not only to be filled with Malays because we know that if the school is a Malaysian school, it is better for this Malay boy because there is more competition, because this boy will know the world is bigger than this Malay world. But Umno is not doing that because there’s too much vested interest.

Najmie: Which is a bit weird when you come to think about it; it’s not about the politics but about making as much money as possible while you’re in politics. [We
I believe that I am Malaysian first. I also believe that the Malays have nothing to fear. What is important and that the Malays should fear is that if we do not change as a community, we will always be left out, no matter what policies government comes out with to help us. Ironically, it seems that the more the government helps the Malays, the opposite result is the case. Or the help only goes to the few.

But can Umno be the party to help the Malay community? I think yes. There is still a large number of the Malay community, who despite the fact that they hate the corruption in Umno, still have hope for Umno. This group of conservative Malays feel that they are closer to Umno’s ideas (or the original ideas, at least). Because of this proximity to the conservative Malay group, Umno will have better chance to change the community for the better.

I want Umno to be the party that tells the Malay community that there is nothing to fear, and that in helping the Malay community, there is no need for us to exclude or discriminate against others. The economic pie is big enough for everyone, and the more entrepreneurial we become, the bigger the pie grows.

I want Umno to be the honest party, that tells the Malay community that in order to succeed and be innovative, we must embrace competition and liberalisation. The idea of Ketuanan Melayu must not be highlighted and should not be the case, not only because it may seem to be provocative but also because it would hint at the real problem of the Malay community: comfort zone. When you are Tuan, why should you work? Tuan only collects rent.

All this change is part of a Malay agenda. Umno is a Malay agenda party. Do we have to be racist to propagate the above values to the Malay crowd? I don’t think so. What we need is a group of Malay leaders who must be daring enough to be unpopular, and to be strong enough to tell the party and to tell the Malay community that if we, the Malays, want to remain a strong community, we must learn it the hard way.

At the end of the day, we are protected by the Constitution, by the Sultans, and even by the fact that we are the majority in number. What we must fear is that if the Malays are continuously handicapped by all this protection, we might not survive the changing world around us.

I joined Umno possibly because of the influence that my family’s political inclination had on me. On top of that, I felt that Umno was the party I knew best; I knew how it worked, and even if it is a corrupt regime, I knew exactly where and why it is corrupt. Is it just a case of the devil I knew better? I like to think not, because I also like to think that, as a political party, there is not much difference in the workings of Umno, Pas, or even Keadilan. Only the rhetoric is different, but policy-wise, all of them either have the same policy linings, or no policy at all.

Of course, most people say Umno is racist, and Pas and Keadilan are not. I think that’s a simplification. I think the racial issue is not an Umno problem - it is a community problem. Umno might close shop tomorrow, but the other parties may still be racial in their core (though maybe not in rhetoric) because the community is still racial. Umno may be corrupt, but is it any more racial than PAS or even some divisions of Keadilan? I don’t think so.

Because I’m comfortable in Umno, I see a lot of ‘opportunity’, though I wouldn’t use the word ‘hope’, because politics are mere platforms to achieve an agenda.

My belief is that Malay people have problems, and this causes problems to other communities as well, because the Malays are in the majority. I want Umno to change the Malay people, the opportunity to tell them that Malaysia is changing, the world is changing, and the Malay people must change too.

Change is a very dirty word nowadays in the Malay community. I can feel it when I talk to my parents, my aunts, my grandmother. They like to say that we are losing the Malayness in this country. I find this fear troubling. There is also a growing number of my friends who think the same. They say we must keep this a Malay country.

I would like to bring in both your points; the fact that the fact hasn’t been on proposing the best policies – and we might criticise the Opposition for not having policies or be seen to not have policies, but their policies are never discussed in the mainstream press anyway. Why is it that the focus hasn’t been on policies of good governance, on a good healthcare and education system, and as you say, Firdaus, how can Umno be non-racial? If you say the best schools will benefit Malays as well, then I bring up again the question of ethnic identity. So how is it that you need to have a race-based party to build the better schools?

Firdaus: No, it’s not that we need a race-based party, we have race-based party because the community shapes it.

We’ve been led to believe all this while that if we don’t have this ‘give and take’ that there will be some kind of conflagration and we will all kill each other. Do you think this holds true?

Najmie: Some areas, possibly...

Firdaus: No, not even some areas...

Firdaus: For one reason or another, there are good leaders that get through this supposedly unfair system that we have in Umno; we have good ministers now as well. What we need is for people to push for it, and it’s not that difficult, to be honest. For example, Datuk Najib is now saying that the liberalisation of the economy is good for the Malay people, and he explains why.

Unfortunately, there are not many people either in or outside Umno who do this liberalisation. You see Datuk Hadi Awang opposing this liberalisation. Did Lim Kit Siang contradict Hadi Awang? No. My point is this: I’m more concerned about how Umno can come up with these policies and tell the Malay people, ‘Look, this is good for the Malays.’

IDENTITY AS DESTINY

If I’m reading you correctly, your point is that there should be a focus on good policy-making and good implementation...
instead of grandstanding and playing to the gallery. Yet we've seen so much of that and so little public discussion of policies. It seems that the nature of our politics is such that ethnic identity always takes centre stage.

Ari: That's because, if I may say, that's how the older generation were groomed to be in politics. We can choose to sing along to that tune, or say, 'I want to improve the healthcare system, I want to cut down on corruption, I want to ensure that schools are small...'

Firdaus: And he would add, 'Because that's good for the Malay people.' That's how he would say it in Umno.

Ari: Our grandfathers probably supported Umno because it brought us independence; my father's generation, because they saw hard-knocks development, say, a school. But my generation wants to see what comes out of the school. So one household, three generations who look at things very differently. The onus is on us to change their outlook.

Firdaus: And you've got nothing to lose, because you're young in Umno.

Najmie: I think Ari's point is very pertinent because it means that you can work within Umno, a race-based party. Not all national issues have an ethnic dimension at their core, or if they do, you don't have to play on that, and it's okay.

But systemically, isn't the fact that a race-based party...

Najmie: ...by default is worse off than a non race-based party? Let's say Malaysia has higher average income per capita than Singapore. If we produced the most brilliant minds but with the same Barisan Nasional government now, would this argument still hold? Effectiveness is more important than race and it could work within the Barisan Nasional's platform...

It could, but it clearly isn't.

Najmie: Is it because of the race-based policies or is it because of the people within the race-based parties?

Can you help but think along racial lines if you are within such a system?

Ari: I can choose to stick with my principles and make the difference. If I practice the same old politics, I can be in PKR and I know people in PKR who are more racist because they are old Umno. It's not the form that matters, it's the substance that comes out of it.

Najmie: And that is it, Umno's challenge.

Firdaus: That's true. And to be fair, since the last March elections, I would say that, structurally, we are changing. But whether or not we are changing fast enough so that we can create a product that we can sell before the next elections, that's a different question.

What I would criticise is that Umno is thinking it's just an internal structural change. It's not just an internal change; we must also, externally [among the BN component parties], sell the product differently. That, I don't think Umno has yet to discuss...

Ari: I would give credit to the Prime Minister for doing that.

Firdaus: He himself, yes, alone, not the party.

Najmie: This is where it's very important to see Umno not necessarily in terms of what the masses in Umno think it is; if you see it that way, you cannot change...

Firdaus: Of the twenty-three Cabinet Ministers that we have, Umno has thirteen. If more than three among them supports this so-called external change that the Prime Minister is talking about, I would be happy.

What do you mean by external change? You mean how change is presented to people?
Shahril: In some ways that’s exactly what the previous Prime Minister faced. Déjà vu.

So one prime minister failed. His successor, you think he will succeed in reforming the party?

Firdaus: I’m optimistic that Najib will come up with more and more good ways of selling Umno. I’m not too optimistic whether the buy-ins from his own people will be good enough for them when it comes to 2013 to sell it to others.

Ari: It’s not just about Najib’s challenge to reform Umno. Najib’s challenge is also to propel the country forward, but let’s face it, a few years after Mahathir, how do we meet again the challenges against the likes of Chinese Taipei, South Korea, that’s the focus of Singapore. Because when Asia gets more globalised, we’re going to lose out, because in twenty years time we’re going to be as big as Thailand or Indonesia or be as small as Singapore.

That’s where our complications arise, you see.

Ari: It’s not just the party, but also our competitiveness...

Najmie: But our competitiveness is affected by the political nature...

Ari: Yes, but if he (Najib) solves Umno, does it mean he’s going to solve the healthcare system, is he going to solve companies being more competitive?

Najmie: Which one comes first?

Ari: If he’s just going to focus on the party
then the country is going to stall.

**DAMAGED FROM YOUNG**

I think what you’re seeing of the education system is the result of a kind of policy, post-May 13, 1969, which has damaged the institution of education which in turn has affected our competitiveness.

**Ari:** Are we a damaged product then?

Some are more fortunate than others to have a certain kind of education, but those who have to go through the Malaysian school system all the way through to tertiary education might not be equipped with the skills [to compete globally].

**Najmie:** Fair enough. Let’s put things into perspective. When we say that graduates are not competitive enough in their environment, is it because of the education system itself, or is it because the education system has now been available to a lot more people?

**You’re talking about grade inflation, then.**

**Najmie:** Probably ...

**Firdaus:** The (British) Labour party had this problem as well when all the polytechnics became universities. Because the electorate demands that there are more graduates, this is what is happening in this country too.

**Well, that’s the danger with populism. You can’t just open the floodgates.**

**Ari:** That’s why I said our generation is not concerned about who builds the school, but what comes out of the school. So the three-generational thing is a reality and that’s when we come in and say maybe our education is not perfect, but it doesn’t mean it’s bad, it’s a failure or we’re damaged. It means it can get better. So that’s what we have to do, just make it better.

That’s all true, the point that there is more of a disparity and variation in the type of kids that we now get going to school and into the tertiary system. But seriously, do you think that the education system is not damaged?

**Firdaus:** No, no. I agree that there are so many things to change about the education system but number one, obviously it’s not because Umno is messed up. I wouldn’t say it’s because of Umno running...

**Ari:** ‘Damaged’ is such a harsh word; are you saying that the current generation is not as good as the previous generation...

**It’s not?**

**Ari:** If the previous generation who supposedly learned in English are so much better than we all, why aren’t we [better off now for their wisdom]? Is there much to be done [with the education system]? Yes. But ‘damaged’, you’re saying, like, it’s broken.

**There is something fundamentally wrong with it.**

**Najmie:** Is it fundamentally wrong... or will it get better? I’m from ITM. My peers, some of them, their parents were farmers, rubber tappers, from Felda. Maybe they don’t deserve to be graduates, fair enough, but they are better off than their parents when it comes to education, and they will make sure that their kids are better than them. So gradually it will improve in that way.

**Firdaus:** I think all of us would also agree that the education system is one of the main causes of this racialness that we have, and that the current government is responsible for it.

In primary school, Malays go to one school, Chinese go to one school, Indians go to one school; when they go to high school, they [have been conditioned as such]. In public universities there are mostly Malays; private colleges, mostly non-Malays and the ones overseas they are mostly mixed and you know that’s why those who come back from overseas they have different...

But I think these are not particularly Umno issues or current government issues. These are national issues.

**Ari:** National issues should be Umno issues.

**Shahril:** What he’s trying to say is that it’s not Umno’s fault.

**Ari:** Umno did govern with a coalition with MCA, MIC, and they had a say, we did not govern alone.

**It was political barter. I give you your school, you give me mine...**

**Shahril:** Again, it’s a reflection of what the people want. If you were to speak to DAP what would their position be?

**I think it’s too broad a statement. Is it what ‘the Chinese’ want? As for the Tamil schools, who wants the Tamil schools?**

**Shahril:** The statistics show over 90 percent of Chinese parents send their kids to Chinese schools...

And ninety percent of Malay parents send their children to national schools. Why do they send their kids to the Chinese schools? Is it because they want their kids to learn in Chinese, or is it because the quality of education is better? Also, those who can afford it send their kids to private schools. What have now is not just an ethnic divide but a class divide, so there are obviously some things really gravely wrong with the education system.

**Firdaus:** Yes, definitely. But going back to what the popular mandate is, Dr Mahathir proposed the Vision School idea because he obviously realised that it’s all messed up and he knew he couldn’t make everyone go to one school. What’s happened to the Vision School now? It’s failed because the people don’t want it.

**Why don’t they want it?**

**Firdaus:** I don’t want to sound racist but, unfortunately, the non-Malays feel that they are being discriminated against. When I talk to my Chinese friends they say we send our children to Chinese school because being Chinese is the only thing I have left.

They want some retention of their ethnic identity and there is some fear that national schools are being Islamised.

**Firdaus:** I agree with you that there are some Malay educationists who are promoting national schools because it’s to their advantage, but there are also some Malays and non-Malays who really push for national schools because they know this is the Malaysia that we want. This is the solution...

[In general the community has become very divided; people congregate in different areas; Malays in Shah Alam, Chinese in Puchong, for example. [On education], we and the politicians have to be on the same page. Of course, this is like one of those idealisms: everyone agrees that we don’t become racial, we agree that there’s only one school...

**Najmie:** Firdaus brings up a very interesting point: your choice of where you live [largely determines which school you attend]. I know of Chinese friends, and they are friends, who would not for a million years even consider staying in Shah Alam – not because it is a bad city, but simply because it’s a Malay town. And vice versa: Malays don’t go to Seri Kembangan, Kuchai Lama or Kepong. It’s something that bothers me every time I talk to them because these are supposedly [broad-minded] people who live in ‘urban areas’ as well. They are even from Subang, where we went to school together with Chinese and Indians and yet there is this [phenomenon]. We don’t know how it happens, but it happens.

**Shahril:** I think we may be simplifying; we could just be the transitional generation. We haven’t really gone past the historical problem. In our eyes, we can see it could be otherwise, but we’re somewhere in the middle...

**Firdaus:** More contentiously, would you have no vernacular schools if say Mara [opened its doors to all races] and we could all go to one school? That is also a difficult
question to answer. Keadilan has come up in support of vernacular schools, and I'm surprised. How can you have a united Malaysia if people go to different schools? It's as simple as that.

[That said], I know that in Umno, there are people who support national schools not because they [support] 1Malaysia or for the right reasons, but because they know if 'you all' also go to national school, the Malays will be in the majority and then 'we can do whatever we want'. And that's the reason why the Chinese don't want to go to national schools.

But we have to have a middle path; we need Chinese who can talk to the Chinese and say, 'We must go to one school', and Malays who must talk to the Malay government, supposedly, and say look, 'You cannot abolish Christian clubs, or you cannot abolish Buddhist clubs because it's a national school.'

Ari: There hasn't been abolition of any...

Firdaus: But of course there is Islamisation as well. If you ask me why we cannot solve this problem, it's because it's a Malay issue. Religion is the main thing that Malays have – Islam.

Shahril: Its association with our identity even our generation holds on to, even if we don't practice it as much. It is so ingrained in our identity.

Firdaus: Personally, this is where secularisation, even it's a taboo word, must come in.

Ari: I disagree totally with that.

Firdaus: We as a country must decide that, okay, if we are to have religious schools, either we teach all religions or we teach no religion. I'm sure I'll be ostracised if I say this in the Umno general assembly. But at the end of the day, ostracised or not...

If you say what again, specifically?

Firdaus: To say that there shouldn't be Islamic religious teaching taught in schools.

Ari: You're saying ignore God from the education system, so we all will be fair...

Firdaus: I'm not saying ignore God. I'm saying, let's be fair: either you teach all religions and have moral classes for those who don't subscribe to one, or you don't teach it at all.

Khat: I can entertain that, but will people vote for that?

That's a different question.

Firdaus: The question is, what is the right thing to do? And I'm sure that strong leaders can do it. The problem is...

Najmie: ...leaders who are brave enough to think about that won't become leaders. They will vote someone who opens a division meeting with a prayer, for example. That's the issue for them. I might not be able to recite a verse...

2013

It's the chicken and egg thing

conundrum, whether our political leaders can set the tone, or whether they're beholden to the system.

Ari: You say it's a chicken and egg, but one thing you must understand is that the people don't always agree on the same thing, so there must be a leader brave enough to say 'This is what I'll do, if you like me, support me, if not, I don't mind.'

Can I name you that leader who's gone on and said that? It's Anwar Ibrahim,
without whom March 8 wouldn’t have happened.
(animated discussion)
Firdaus: If we want to talk about politics, then the challenge for Umno is to come up with a product, by 2013 to challenge Ketuanan Rakyat.
Remember that Umno now has the most seats as a single party. So technically I could also say that Umno has reached a certain utility level because the other Malay seats that Umno can add to what it already has are Pas seats, as it were. As Umno can’t really win that many more seats on its own, then for Barisan Nasional to win in 2013, we need those Chinese seats. We need to get MCA to win twenty-four seats as they used to, and we need MIC or whatever party there is to win those Indian seats.
We need to talk honestly with MCA and MIC, if there’s an MIC... and ask them, ‘What do you want us, Umno, to do, so that we can win? At the end of the day, you are Barisan Nasional.’

Shahril: I think it’s also important to say that when I meet some of the Umno grassroots they tend to be in denial that 2008 was Umno’s fault. Part of Umno’s standard operating procedure is to convince its own members that it’s also how MCA and MIC lost...

Ari: Correct, because Umno always harps on ‘We won, we delivered, we overdelivered...’

One thing I observe, that when Hindraf was a big issue, I think we just left it to MIC, okay you settle the Indians, and if there’s anything, then you tell us. We need a leader to say ‘Indian problem, my problem,’ and not, ‘Indian problem, MIC, you go and settle it and then only you tell me what’s wrong.’

Firdaus: You see, Datuk Najib gets this, but it’s not enough that he gets it. Other Umno leaders, in the party, in the Cabinet, must get it as well. That’s the challenge for our next election.

THE CHALLENGE
The challenge is...
Firdaus: Having younger leaders. You have to remember that last time, the voters were our fathers, those who, when they saw KLCC, would say, ‘Oh, we have to vote Barisan Nasional.’

And one more thing, if we talk about blogs, for example, you can see that we don’t have good Umno or Barisan Nasional blogs to defend the party.

Khat: We don’t have a lot of intellectual capital in Umno.

Firdaus: There isn’t an intelligentsia to defend Barisan Nasional in an intelligent way. Young Umno people want to hear an intelligent argument that defends Barisan Nasional. And there isn’t any.

Khat: I wouldn’t say there isn’t any, I’ll just say there’s little of it.

How representative of youth is Umno?
Najmie: Interesting question. I think it’s a simple matter of Umno accepting that the very definition of Malay itself has changed from what they think it is. There are some in the party who are still holding on to a very rigid interpretation of what Malays should be when the reality is that Malays are changing. Whether for the better or for worse is not for me to judge, but ‘on the ground’, the moral values and things that supposedly represent Malayness are no longer part of what being Malay really is. People talk about [the immorality of] ‘urban’ kids, but those who view .3gp (mobile phone) porn are mostly from rural areas; high school kids having sex all over the place – it’s Malay kids.

People talk about Umno trying to be inclusive of other races, but the number one thing they must include all types of Malays in the party, liberals, or whatever.

Shahril: I think the challenge for us to support Umno is, like I’ve said, to make sure that the dominant narrative of Umno is not right-wing. We have to present an alternative voice within the system. Our challenge is to say that this is not the only way to see Malays; Malay nationalism can be an inclusive one.

Ari: I frown upon some members [who wear t-shirts that read] ‘maintain ISA to defend Malay rights.’ Are you telling me that my dignity as a Malay is defined in this draconian law? I’m embarrassed to be called a Malay by your definition.

The politics of fear, is that the dominant narrative of Umno?
Najmie: There is genuine fear... I used to run a restaurant business. The Chinese supplier would quote us different prices depending on whether we sent a Chinese guy to buy the goods. I’m not complaining, but these are the things that the Malays, especially on the ground, are very much aware of, unfortunately. That’s why I say that I’ve seen people who are racist regardless of what their race is. They just don’t like any other races; not that they’re against Chinese or Malays in particular. Some people might not experience it, and so the danger arises when politicians use examples like this to generalise...

Firdaus: If we talk about a much harder
issue, such as housing quotas, for example, not only are the Malay quota houses badly built, but because they can only be resold to a Malay, they have virtually no value on the open market. I’ve always wondered why Umno does not realise this, and Pas as well, in Kedah? If you ask me the reason why, it’s because there is no strong Malay leader to come out and say ‘Look guys, yes we want to help the Malays but this is not the way we do it.’

Ari: I can go to Wharton Business School but it’s not the same as me opening a shop. You learn business from experiencing business and not from reading a textbook. The onus sometimes is not just on Umno, but the Malays themselves. We admit Malays sometimes are the ones taking advantage of certain things.

Firdaus: It’s selfishness. It’s Malay leaders deciding not to do the right thing because it benefits them personally. Why is it that there is a specific allocation for Malay houses? Because then they can get cheap Malay houses and sell them on to Malay people – they don’t care whether or not that Malay person who’s living there can sell it to another person. They don’t care. They’ve cornered the market. And everyone in town knows who the agents are who sell those houses, and who they’re connected with. It’s as simple as that.

Shahril: The narrative is this: they are the immigrants, we are the masters, we are sons of the soil, we deserve every help we get, and the immigrants don’t deserve anything. But we give it to them anyway. I’m not saying that’s the entire dominant narrative, but that’s one aspect of it.

Firdaus: I would also like to remind this discussion that Alor Setar Malays (in Kedah, where the Pas state government has set aside 50 percent of housing developments for bumiputera only), they are not just Umno people. Most of them voted for Pas. So this is a cross-party issue. As Shahril mentioned, to the extreme right, we are the masters, you see.

And to be fair, families do that as well; they keep on preaching to the younger generation that by default, we are the masters, that other people are immigrants – even if they themselves just came from Indonesia thirty years ago and their children are first generation Malaysians.

So how do we do this, how do we actually solve this problem? I say it’s beyond Umno. Of course it helps if Umno, for example, tones down the so-called racist remarks in Utusan (Malaysia). But it’s not going to solve the problem. And of course, having Umno members who think of strengthening the Malays and all that, would help as well...

Ari: Rather than ‘defend’ Malay rights.

Firdaus: Correct. This goes to the question about changing Umno. For me, that is the wrong criticism. We’re not in it because we want to change Umno. Don’t tell me you’re in a political party because you don’t want to be in power as well. But every political party which is Malay-based has that responsibility to bring the majority of the Malay spectrum to the centre-right.

If you want to help someone, conduct means testing.

Khat: I agree.

Firdaus: Means testing is important [but] in Umno, we have to convince them of it. The statistics [on which this is to be done] must be right as well. In this country, we don’t even have polling except for that recently done by the Merdeka Centre.

WHOSE VOICE?

Is Umno relevant to the times?  

Najmie: As long as the society still chooses the type of leaders that it wants, these are the type of leaders that will represent the views of the people who voted for Umno [at the last general election], for now.

Firdaus: It’s unfortunate.

Khat: Yes, it’s unfortunate.

Najmie: And that’s how political systems work, we choose a leader and they represent our views. If we don’t like it...

Firdaus: Remember, we won the most seats in the last elections.

Ari: We’re not saying this in arrogance or in ignorance. Is there a lot to be done? Of course. Are there reforms that need to take place? Yes.

Firdaus: Because, if MCA and MIC win the next elections, it is Barisan Nasional that would have won, and not Umno. If we lose all our component party seats, we are dead. Simple as that. Let’s be really honest, this whole episode about [sacrificing] our non-Malay seats for a Malay (‘unity’) government is a so-called reality which we, and I, oppose.

Najmie: But this is what the people on the ground have been saying. It’s not for us to decide; it is five of us here but there could be another fifty guys who vote for this resolution (for a ‘unity government’), and I can’t do anything about it. We can be as eloquent as we want, and we are quite eloquent I think, but it doesn’t resonate with the crowd.

Shahril: We support Umno for what it can become, not for what it is.

Ari: We’re saying, Look, I’m different from my people in my branch and division, and for a good reason, we hope.

Najmie: We don’t know; we cannot assume that our opinion will bring benefit to the people.

Firdaus: The key question for Malaysia in the next twenty-five years is, can the community cross racial lines? The Malay community, for example, may not want that. As a matter of fact I’m convinced that in general, they don’t want that. That is why people in Pas and in PKR are telling me that in the worst-case scenario, let’s have a Malay government.

Shahril: The way I see it, Barisan Nasional, we can still say that the formula still works relatively well. We have to convince people that we are ready to move from being a coalition of just compromises to a coalition of ideals. But what the ideals are, that’s where we have to work on. We have never really engaged on what Barisan Nasional means, the national identity of Barisan Nasional. 1Malaysia, we need something like that, even if it’s just rhetoric.

Firdaus: As a matter of fact, I think 1Malaysia sells better than Ketuanan Rakyat.

Alternatively it’s this. From a Machiavellian point of view, I would say forget about the Malay areas because we’ve supposedly got that Malay vote anyways. Go for the Chinese vote because that’s what we need. We need MCA to win those seats. And personally I think there’s two things: Chinese seats, and Sarawak. That is the determinant for the next elections.

If we were to put the Keadilan boys on one side and us on the other, and you give us the privilege of not being tied up to the problems caused by the old generation of Umno, we could debate about what we would do if we were in power, without prejudice. I think we have a fairly equal chance.