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"I never dreamed of becoming PM... I was appointed as a solution to resolve the political turmoil at the time. It is a huge responsibility... I will do what is best for the country. Insya-Allah."

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in a special interview to mark the first anniversary of the Perikatan Nasional administration

► REPORT BY FARIDUL ANWAR FARINORDIN, ADIB POVERA AND HANA NAZ HARUN ON PAGES 4-7

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SPECIAL INTERVIEW

PM: NEW PLAN TO BOOST RECOVERY MOMENTUM

It has been a little more than a year since the Covid-19 virus wreaked havoc across the globe. The pandemic left governments all over the world grappling with the best way to respond, and it was no different for Malaysia.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin started off in the hot seat as prime minister during an up-trend in locally transmitted cases. The Perikatan Nasional government under his leadership found itself navigating the country through treacherous currents of unprecedented economic and health challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conjunction with the one-year anniversary of the PN administration, Muhyiddin sat down with members of the media for a special interview at his home in Damansara.

He told New Straits Times senior news editor FARIDUL ANWAR FARINORDIN and other editors about the decisions that had to be made to strike a balance between protecting people's lives and livelihoods and safeguarding the country's economy.

THE government will announce an additional strategy in the middle of this month to help the economy recover from the adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin described the strategy as a comprehensive plan that would help create a conducive business environment, boosting the momentum of the country's economic recovery.

The additional strategy, he said, would complement the previously announced economic stimulus package worth more than RM300 billion to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

"I have discussed this with

with the finance minister (Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz). Insha-Allah, it will be announced sometime in the middle of this month.

"I will announce what is our actual strategy to come out of this crisis and help create a more conducive economic environment for the country."

Muhyiddin said the measures that had already been rolled out by the government could generate a positive outcome by the end of the year.

"Having said that, the government has introduced several measures to cushion the impact of the global pandemic.

"The measures in place are not a piecemeal strategy, but a comprehensive plan that will help revive the economy."

Despite the global uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, Muhyiddin was upbeat that Malaysia remained an attractive investment destination for foreign investors.

He based this on the ability of his administration to attract new investments worth RM109.8 billion in manufacturing and other main sectors, within a period of nine months last year.

"There are 2,935 projects that will be implemented, creating 64,701 employment opportunities."

In addition, he said the government was offering special incentives to attract more foreign direct investments into the country.

"The special incentives will be provided for a period of two years starting this year. If you come to Malaysia, you get these very attractive incentives."

During the interview, the Pagh member of parliament also elaborated on a wide range of topics, including the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme, the proclamation of the state of emergency and his thoughts on the next general election.

The following are excerpts from the interview:

Question: How did you make the selection of the country's



administrative machinery?

Answer: When I assumed the position of prime minister, we were already facing an unprecedented situation due to the Covid-19 outbreak that had already spread across countries around the world, including Malaysia.

As the head of the government, my first major task was to think of ways to protect the people from the threat of Covid-19. Alongside members in the cabinet, our main priority were the lives and livelihoods of the people.

That is why we immediately introduced the Movement Control Order (MCO), which at the time was regarded as an extraordinary measure. Although the people did not understand why the government had to implement the MCO at the time, they were aware of the danger the country was facing.

We also formed a special committee on Covid-19 under the National Security Council (NSC), which convenes a meeting almost every morning. Apart from managing Covid-19, we are also looking into ways to mitigate the economic impact brought about by the pandemic.

Having said that, the country's administration was operating as usual. Alhamdulillah, I am proud to see the dedication and com-

mitment shown by civil servants as they are fully aware of the threat facing the country. At the same time, we are also safeguarding the country from other threats from within and outside the country to ensure Malaysia remains safe.

The unity among the people has remained intact and has not been affected by the (socio-economic) crisis unleashed by the virus.

Q: On a scale of one to five, how do you rate the performance of the PN government? And what is the greatest achievement of the PN administration in the past year?

A: It is up to the people to make their own evaluation on whether the government has introduced the necessary measures to resolve the main issues beleaguering the country, especially in matters relating to Covid-19 prevention.

Secondly, it is up to the rakyat to evaluate whether the measures and assistance introduced by the government have generated positive outcomes for the people. Let's take the Covid-19 vaccine, for example. I was the first individual in the country to be administered with the vaccine.

I hope the vaccine will be the answer to the issues we are facing. We have spent billions to acquire

the vaccine, rolling out the largest vaccination programme in the history of the country.

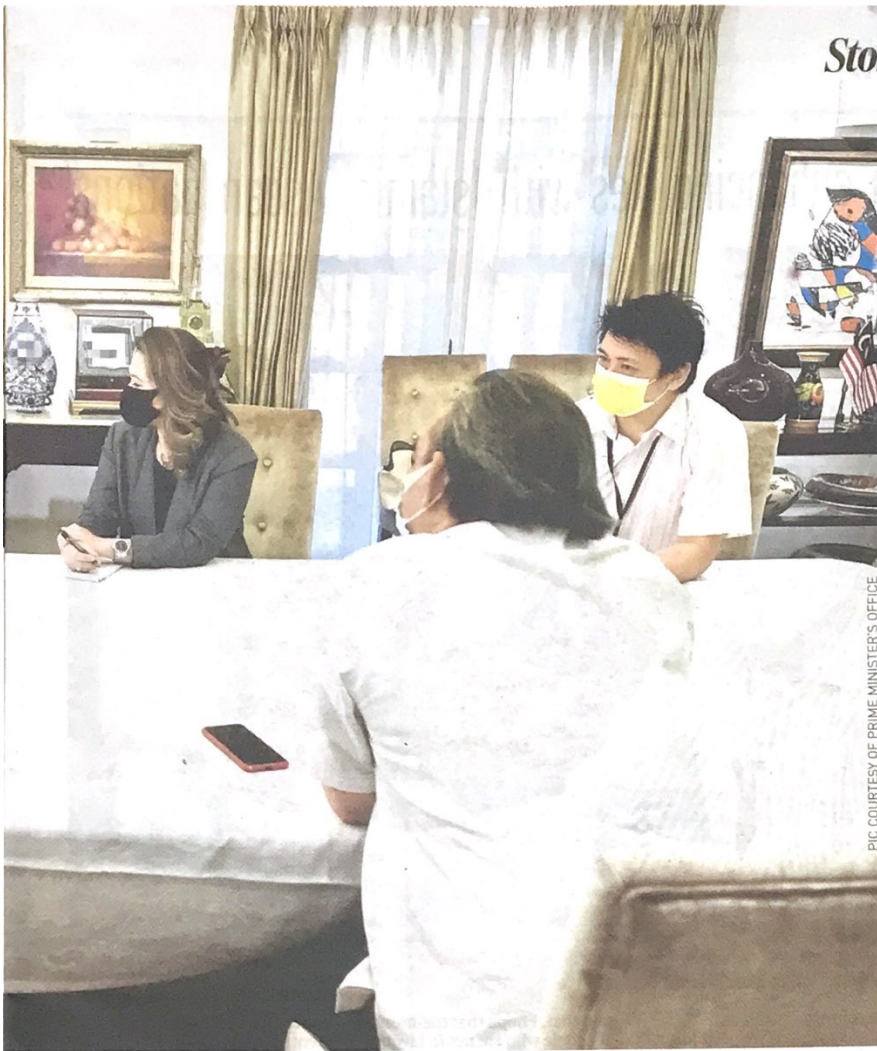
And I would never have questioned it if the ministry in charge of acquiring the vaccine had requested an additional one billion ringgit for the purpose. What is important to me is saving the lives of the people. Even one fatality from the virus is a huge loss for me.

Unlike what is practised in other countries, our government aims to protect the people, whether old or young, from the virus, Insha-Allah. Every single soul is important.

The most important thing is to ensure that no one is left behind in whatever we do. We want to help every single individual affected by the pandemic. This is reflected in the various stimulus packages worth almost RM300 billion already rolled out by the government.

Having said that, there are still groups within society who are of the opinion that the assistance introduced so far is not enough. Nevertheless, I have raised the matter with the finance minister. We will give (further assistance) if there is a need to do so.

Q: A year has passed since the pandemic hit the country. What is your view on the ac-



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ceptance among the people of the initiatives introduced by the PN government to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?

A: Generally, I feel that the people are satisfied with the government's management of the pandemic. I am also aware that there were times the people were unhappy, especially when Covid-19 cases registered an increase. Moving forward, the people will be safer this year and this is important to me.

Secondly, it is important that the wellbeing of the people continues to be protected as this would ensure that they have food on the table.

I do not want to see a situation where people have no food to eat. I think that's important. We don't want to see Malaysians hungry. If that happens, then I have failed.

That is why the government introduced several initiatives and assistance packages, including the Perlindungan Ekonomi dan Rakyat Malaysia (Permai). Apart from providing monetary assistance, we also distributed help in the form of food baskets.

Nevertheless, I can't do it alone. Government officers can't do it alone, too. We need cooperation from the people for efforts to rise above this crisis to succeed. All

parties must work together to face the challenges and address the problems we are facing at the moment.

Q: Will the government introduce more measures this year to ensure no one is left behind?

A: The pandemic has had a huge impact on society, it may have also altered the percentage of the different income groups in the country.

I believe the Bottom 40, or B40, has now become B50. While the (percentage of) households in the M40 (middle income) remain the same, I believe there is a drop of 10 per cent of households in the T20 (top income) category. This is a problem, I must admit. And it is not my doing, it is due to the problem currently beleaguering the country.

That is why we are focusing on helping the groups of people who are severely affected by the pandemic. Our strategy will emphasise ways to resolve poverty.

Previously, poverty in rural areas was more significant since people residing in urban areas earned more. Things, however, have changed, with the urban poor receiving a heavier blow. This is due to the people's inability to pay (higher) living costs, com-

pared with those in rural areas.

In fact, almost 52 per cent of poverty cases are detected in urban areas. Some of them may have been overlooked due to data (error) in the present system that was not updated. Hence we need to update the system.

We are also looking into ways to help the economy recover while managing the pandemic at the same time.

I am aware that there is no movement in the tourism sector due to restrictions to curb the transmission of the virus.

The tourism, arts and culture minister (Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri) has appealed to the government to allow the tourism sector to resume operations. As much as I want to grant her request, we must wait for a further assessment from the Health Ministry since the measures that have been introduced by the government are based on scientific figures and evidence.

According to projection, it will take between two and four years for the tourism sector, which is severely affected by the pandemic, to recover.

That is why I have told (senior minister for the security cluster) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri (Yaakob) to allow hotels to continue to op-

erate and receive guests.

I am aware that the people are worried. They are worried if they will still have work when they wake up the next morning. The government understands their concerns and we will not spare any effort to attract investments to rejuvenate the economy.

We have to slowly look into this. How and what do we need to do now to manage this problem? This will require micromanaging each sector, and that is what the government is doing now.

Q: The administration under your leadership does not have a manifesto. Having said that, the present government has adopted a people-based focus in its delivery system. Will this be the manifesto of the ruling PN coalition in the next election? Apart from the Shared Prosperity Vision, what more can the present government do for the people?

A: We want to revive the economy by allowing the main sectors to resume operations. The social and education sectors, which are among the sectors badly affected by the pandemic, have to resume operations.

I have instructed the ministries to give greater emphasis and focus on matters relating to the wellbeing of the people, the economy and trade.

At the same time, the chief secretary to the government (Tan Sri Mohd Zuki Ali) is heading a special committee to look into ways to reduce bureaucracy in the government delivery service. Too much bureaucracy will only result in delays and derail our efforts to revive the economy to help the people.

We want the process to be fast. A one-day delay might cause an individual to descend into poverty.

Hence, cutting bureaucracy is one of the drastic actions being undertaken by the government. I hope such measures will be adopted not only at the federal but also at the state level. I hope menteri besar will work together and help us resolve the issues faced by the people.

Under the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, we want to ensure a fair distribution of wealth among the people, irrespective of race and location, especially those residing in Sabah and Sarawak.

Both states must be given equal treatment. Alongside the minister in charge of handling issues related to the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), we are looking into such matters in detail.

We have jointly reached an agreement on some of the negotiations with regard MA63.

Q: Apart from creating a special portfolio in the cabinet to oversee affairs related to Sabah and Sarawak, what other measures will be implemented by the government for the two states?

A: From the beginning, matters related to the affairs of Sarawak

and Sabah have been one of the main priorities of my government. This was reflected in the appointment of Datuk Seri Dr Maximus Ongkili as minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Sabah and Sarawak Affairs) and his deputy (Mukah member of parliament) Datuk Hanifah Hajar Taib.

I have also convened meetings with chief ministers of the states on negotiations and claims relating to MA63. In fact, I have resolved the settlement between Petronas and Sarawak.

The reason I created a special portfolio to oversee matters related to Sarawak and Sabah was because we acknowledge that there is more to be done to help the two states to enable them to be on a par with their counterparts in the peninsula.

Sabah is a big state, equivalent to three or four states in the peninsula. Sarawak is even bigger.

We need to do more for the two states, including providing better infrastructure development and connectivity. You have heard of the student (in Sabah) who had to climb up a tree to catch up with her online studies. This shows that we need to do more to improve Internet services as well as other technological developments.

There are also states in the peninsula that are lagging behind compared with others. Although this a legacy issue from the previous administration, the PN government must find ways to bridge the income gap as enshrined in the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 Blueprint.

Q: You visited Indonesia and conducted a face-to-face meeting with President Joko Widodo early last month. Do you think the absence of official meetings in the traditional sense has become a hurdle for Malaysia in enhancing bilateral ties with other countries?

A: I believe leaders from other countries are also facing the same situation. It is not because they do not want to, but have to due to circumstances.

Malaysia has long adopted a principle to preserve good ties with other countries around the world. This is a principle that I will continue, that we must build good ties with other countries.

Despite the uncertainties caused by the pandemic, I had a face-to-face meeting with President Jokowi (Joko Widodo). I want to elevate the Malaysia-Indonesia relationship to that of a comprehensive strategic partner. I believe Indonesia will rise as a superpower in the region, similar to China.

I am also planning to visit Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sometime early this month. I also plan to visit Brunei, Japan and South Korea since Malaysia has good bilateral ties with these nations in trade, investment and education, as well as to forge better cooperation in the defence sector.

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'My administration will focus on enhancing ties with Islamic, Asean nations'

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Although there are restrictions, it does not mean that we are not focusing on bilateral ties with other countries. Malaysia made history when it successfully organised the first ever virtual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit (last year).

I personally prefer face-to-face meetings and physical visits, where we can discuss issues over a meal. However, we can't do this now due to Covid-19.

Therefore, it is important for the country to ensure the success of the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme because there are those from the business community who want to travel overseas to expand their businesses.

I hope the vaccine will make the world a safer place, allowing us to reopen our borders and enhance bilateral ties with other nations.

Q: Do you think restrictions due to the pandemic have resulted in certain regional and global issues being overlooked?

A: They are not being overlooked. Our Foreign Ministry, the key body that develops ties with other countries, is operating as usual.

At the same time, I receive reports on international issues periodically. Despite being a new administration, we are consistent in our stance and will continue with policies that were introduced by the previous government which are good for the country.

The administration under my leadership will emphasise enhancing ties with Islamic nations, apart from countries in Asean. From my observation, this was not given emphasis during the previous administration.

Malaysia has been acknowledged as an Islamic country that has shown great advancement in technology and other sectors. We want to share our experience and expertise with other nations, irrespective of their trade and economic development.

I also want Malaysia to continue our good ties with China, which is the country's largest trading partner. It is a loss to the country if we do not preserve our ties with China. This is why I plan to conduct an official visit to China to meet President Xi Jinping to look into ways to strengthen our ties and enter into greater cooperation with the republic.

China has been investing in Malaysia in several sectors, including infrastructure development as well as transportation. I learnt that there are many investors from China who are keen to invest in Malaysia.

Foreign policy is not limited to creating peace, the outcome of the relationship could also provide other benefits to Malaysia.



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Q: Do you miss face-to-face interactions with the people?

A: Of course. Every time I want to go back and visit my constituency, I will be reminded of the importance of complying with the SOP to flatten the Covid-19 curve. Although the people in my constituency can engage in virtual meetings, the outcome is not as effective as physical interaction.

That is why we want to find ways to immediately curb the spread of Covid-19. For the time being, we must comply with the SOP and follow all guidelines by the Health Ministry and other authorities.

I hope things will improve soon so that the people can resume their lives.

Q: What is your hope for the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme?

A: I hope more people will come forward to get vaccinated. The government has decided to provide the Covid-19 vaccination for free, not only to Malaysians, but also non-Malaysians residing in

the country.

I was told that we need to get at least 60 per cent of our population vaccinated in order to create herd immunity in the country.

Based on an early survey conducted by the Health Ministry, 67 per cent of respondents agreed to get themselves vaccinated. The percentage has increased to 80 per cent following the arrival of the vaccine and after I was vaccinated.

It would be better if more people got vaccinated under the programme, which is important to the country. This is the biggest ever vaccination campaign in the country that involves everybody, without exception.

Q: The voices of vaccine naysayers are compounded by the irresponsible act of spreading fake news and misinformation on the vaccine. Do you see this as a bump on the road or a big issue?

A: In every society, there will be groups who will disagree. Having

said that, I hope that the number of people who are not in favour of getting vaccinated is insignificant and they are unable to influence others with their campaigns.

I am aware there are quarters spreading rumours that create fear among the people.

To these groups of people, I want to stress that all the government is doing right now is helping them. There is no reason to reject rezeki (God's blessings).

I have received my first dose of the vaccine and I am looking forward to getting the second dose to complete my vaccination process. By getting vaccinated, I know my body is producing antibodies to protect me against the virus.

I believe that the campaign will be well-received by the people since we have mobilised all our machinery, including non-governmental organisations, community leaders, village heads and Rukun Tetangga, for this initiative.

Q: Are you worried that the country is not able to reach herd immunity?

A: We will monitor the situation from time to time, like what we are doing now.

On this note, the ministry has formed a special operation centre that monitors how the campaign is being carried out, the exact number of people who have registered (for the vaccine)

under the MySejahtera app and identify areas that need to be given focus. Of course, at the same time, we are looking at the delivery of the vaccine to ensure it arrives on time.

If all of these are rolled out in the manner planned, I really hope that any efforts to derail it will fail.

Q: Does Malaysia have a comprehensive plan to navigate through economic uncertainties post-Covid-19?

A: We have rolled out several economic stimulus packages to help revitalise the economy. The measures that have been implemented are comprehensive, not piecemeal. Based on our projection, the plan is expected to generate a positive margin by the end of the year.

We have allowed almost all economic sectors to resume operations. Only one or two sectors, including tourism, have yet to recover due to restrictions in place.

I hope to reopen our border one day, but now the situation does not allow us to do so. By opening the border, it will not only help the tourism industry, but also the aviation sector.

Insha-Allah, I will announce a more comprehensive strategy in the middle of this month. I will outline the strategy to get the country out of the crisis brought about by the pandemic

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'Emergency wasn't declared for political gain, but to intensify Covid-19 fight'

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and revitalise our economy.

Q: Critics say that the administration has failed to attract foreign direct investment following the closure of several factories in the country. What is your comment on this?

A: I am aware of the matter and I have read the reports published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad). Malaysia is not the only country whose economy is adversely affected by the pandemic, as this can be seen in other countries too. However, Malaysia is said to be a country significantly affected by the pandemic.

Having said that, there is still strong interest among investors to invest in Malaysia. Based on the latest figures, the country has attracted RM109.8 billion worth of new investment in manufacturing and other main sectors, within a period of nine months last year.

There are also 2,935 projects that will be implemented in the country, which will create 64,701 employment opportunities.

Q: The proclamation of the state of emergency has been criticised as a political tool not only by your detractors, but by leaders of political parties that

are allies in your administration. Can you comment on claims that the proclamation resulted from dwindling support for you in Parliament?

A: The state of emergency proclamation was not done to guarantee my position as prime minister. As of now, I do not know which parties command the majority number of seats that is higher than me.

I am confident that I am backed by huge support. I am also confident that my position as prime minister is constitutionally legal. I carry out my responsibility accordingly.

The declaration of a state of emergency was not for political gain, but to intensify our fight against Covid-19. The Emergency Ordinance allows the country to implement immediate actions to prevent Covid-19 cases from surging even higher.

Previously, there was no time frame given when the state of emergency was declared. However, in this case, the state of emergency will be effective until Aug 1.

However, the state of emergency could end earlier if the 2021 Emergency Independent Committee, which is appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, is of the view that the declaration could be lifted when the Covid-19 situation is under control.

And I will obey whatever is decided by the committee. At the same time, we do not intend to be continuously placed under control.

Let me reiterate that the state of emergency was not declared because I no longer commanded majority support in Parliament. If the support towards me had dwindled in Parliament, how could the 2021 Budget be passed in Parliament last year?

I only want to carry out my responsibilities that the people have entrusted to me.

Q: As you said, the emergency is likely to end on Aug 1 or earlier. With that in mind, do you see the general election being held this year as epidemiologists say it takes one year after vaccination for things to go back to normal?

A: It is not the government, but the 2021 Emergency Independent Committee that will decide whether the state of emergency should end accordingly or earlier than scheduled.

This is, of course, based on the situation on the ground, whether we have managed to flatten the curve, whether the Covid-19 situation in the country is under control or if the number of daily cases has fallen below two digits. This will be decided by the committee.

We must also take into consideration the views of the Health Ministry, experts and epidemiologists on whether the Covid-19 situation has improved and is under control.

The next question is when will the next general election be called. According to the Federal Constitution, if the government of the day intends to dissolve Parliament, it has to seek the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to make way for polls.

The following question is, when is the suitable date to hold the election? Do you have the answer? First things first, let us focus on controlling the spread of Covid-19 within the community.

Once that is done with, I will not wait a day longer.

Q: You are leading a country of 30 million people at a time when the country is facing a challenging period, that no other prime minister has experienced before. For you personally, what drove you to take this challenge? And how do you manage to sustain the energy and the drive?

A: It is all by the grace of God. I never dreamed of becoming prime minister. I am also aware that I was not chosen through an election, but was appointed as a solution to resolve the political

turmoil at the time.

When I was appointed to this position, I was aware that it is a huge responsibility. I am doing what I think is best for the nation. I can tell you that from day one, I only think about what more can be done to save this country.

As a Muslim, I am aware of my responsibilities. I know that I will be questioned (by God) in the Afterlife on the things I have done for the people in the country during my tenure as prime minister.

Every time I pray, I ask Allah to continue giving me guidance and to help me in my daily affairs. I have faith that everything can only happen if God allows it, In-sya-Allah. This is my strong conviction to Islam, my religion.

All I want is to do my very best. I want to leave a legacy not for my own self, but for the country.

I have done what I think is the best for the country. And I can assure all Malaysians that I am committed to upholding my responsibilities as prime minister. I would also like to thank all Malaysians for remaining united and resolute in facing the pandemic. I will do my very best. I will fight against corruption and I will not interfere with any process of the judiciary. I will do what is best for the country. In-sya-Allah. **Also by Adib Povera and Hana Naz Harun**