

RSOG LEADERSHIP FORUM

Leading with Perseverance and Persistence – My Journey

with

Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad

When : 13 May 2016
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad

About the Seminar

Steve Jobs once said *“I’m convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance”*. Evidently, such *endurance* is also observed in successful organisations, sports teams, institutions, athletes, public leaders, and even nations. It is the ability to endure challenges, staying focused during difficult and good times, and steadfastly pursue purpose or course of action. Perseverance and persistence is also observed to play an important role in staying relevant in a rapidly changing world. Easier said than done though, as perseverance and persistence seems to come harder than before. Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad has been around in the Malaysian public life for more than four decades, in various capacities and roles. This Leadership Forum intends to explore the journey that he has gone through, his thoughts on contemporary leadership, and the way forward..

Summary

The political landscape is one that sees constant change with regards to the issues discussed and its key players. In this dynamic field, it takes an outstanding and tenacious character to successfully engage the needs of voters. Played correctly, the political process is one that will provide benevolence to its people and change society for the better. This rings true for Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad, whose career in Malaysian politics has spanned over 40 years.

Tan Sri Shahrir himself divides his life into three phases, beginning with his graduation from the University of Malaya in 1972. He was appointed as the Political Secretary to the then Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry, Tun Musa Hitam in 1973 and former Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak in 1976. In the 1978 General Election, he contested and won the Johor Bahru seat. He moved on to hold many other public offices, including Minister of Federal Territories and Minister of Social Welfare. Tan Sri Shahrir considers 1990 to be the end of the first phase of his career, when he stepped down as a Member of Parliament for Johor Bahru. In the second phase of his career (1990-2004), Tan Sri Shahrir took a less active role

in politics and forayed into several business ventures, including laundry/dry-cleaning and ironmongery. Nevertheless, he remained as an Executive Council member for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and became the Head of Division for UMNO Johor Bahru.

In 2000, Tan Sri Shahrir ran a successful campaign for a seat in the UMNO Supreme Council. His final phase in his political career came when he returned to parliament and won the Johor Bahru seat in the 2004 elections. In 2008 during the former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's tenure, he was appointed Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs. Tan Sri Shahrir also shared with the audience his desire to retire from politics in 2018 and to enter his fourth phase in life, which is the pursuit of academia.

One key theme during the talk was the emphasis that public policy be created for public benefit. He alludes to policies created by Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in favour of regional development and policies to elevate B40 households to middle-income society as successful examples. Among his many work during his political career, Tan Sri Shahrir indicated that his accomplishments with public housing between 1984 and 2004 were his most outstanding. As the proud proponent of the first low-cost three-bedroom housing in Kuala Lumpur, he was able to address the needs of Malaysian families in providing affordable housing and to tackle the issue of widespread loitering among Malaysian youth.

It is Tan Sri Shahrir's long career and experience in politics that allows him the right to speak on political relevance. Sustainability in politics, he ponders, comes through engagement with the voters, to distil their thoughts and to earn the legitimacy to speak for them. On persistence, Tan Sri Shahrir compares the mind-set for political longevity as akin to that of a long-distance runner: one who controls his emotions and remains loyal to the goals he/she has set forth. Rather humorously, he cites keeping a low profile so as to not interfere with other political heavyweights is also key, but maintains that enough must always be done for the people. Above all, a successful and competitive candidate should possess three qualities, namely:

1. A Brand:

While Tan Sri Shahrir's independent thinking has allowed him to carry out essential work, his sustainability in politics comes as a result of developing a brand that reflects the needs of his constituency. By engaging with the masses, a politician will be able to develop a worthy brand to champion throughout a long political career. Thus, a heavy responsibility falls on its leader to gauge, understand and to finally determine the exact wants and needs of the people.

2. A Network:

Tan Sri Shahrir emphasises the importance of maintaining a strong network in obtaining support for the political brand. He acknowledges his success in carrying out his duties are due to the long-term cooperation of his party and government in realising key achievements, particularly in establishing approximately 3,000 housing units for 2,000 families.

3. Support form Locality:

In keeping with the philosophy of altruism in politics, the ability to engage with the grassroots serves as a fundamental trait in political sustainability as it offers a candidate a holistic view beyond the political party. In the age of technology, Tan Sri Shahrir dismisses the idea of potential political candidates who interact with voters solely via a social media platform, claiming that there is no substitute for the impact of a face-to-face connection.

In concluding his talk, Tan Sri Shahrir explains his decision to step down from politics is out of respect to his successors, whom he believes are worthy enough to take over. He believes that local groups should be empowered to develop a sense of responsibility, similar to how political candidates should experience issues first-hand to earn the legitimacy to speak for the people. On a final note, he reiterates the positive effects of persistence in any experience, be it in politics or in business.

Key Lessons Imparted

1. Going through different phases in life is natural and is influenced by surroundings and its people. Throughout, it is important to remain practical and sensible;
2. Interaction with peers and citizens is crucial in order to stay in touch with the hearts and minds of society. A politician must identify the issues that are important to the public and to address them effectively;
3. Successful political candidates must identify a brand and to project their beliefs accurately to their voters. Furthermore, all public policies should yield tangible public benefits;
4. A practical lifestyle is important to remain grounded, especially for a long-term political career. It is important to know your individual character and limitations; and
5. Leaders should establish certain noble pursuits and to stay true to them throughout their career.

About the Speaker

Tan Sri Shahrir Abdul Samad was born in Kuantan, Pahang, and attended local primary schools. He later attended the Malay College Kuala Kangsar for his secondary education. He went on to gain an Economics degree from the University of Malaya in Statistics, and a Masters of Business Administration from the International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1973 he became the youngest Political Secretary in the country when he became the Political Secretary to Tun Musa Hitam. After his tenure expired in 1975, he became Political Secretary to the Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak until 1976. He had held many public offices throughout his career. Presently, he is the Member of Parliament for Johor Bahru as well as the Chairman of the Barisan Nasional Backbenchers Club.

Contact

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