

Malaysia's Transition to Abdullah

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What will Malaysia be like after Mahathir Mohamad leaves office in October? That's a fair question, given that Mahathir has been prime minister for 22 years. Under him, Malaysia acquired a modern economy and infrastructure. Poverty was reduced to 7.5% from 37%. There are 10 times more students in tertiary education. Levelling one political hurdle after another, Mahathir remade the monarchy, the judiciary and his own party before finishing off by bringing the country through the concurrent calamities of the Asian Crisis and the Anwar Ibrahim affair. So what happens when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi takes over?

Mahathir bequeaths to Abdullah four items of unfinished business. The first is to restore meritocracy. After 30 years of preferential educational policies leading to the apparent mediocrity of the favoured and the ill-will of everyone else, racial quotas on university entry have been repealed. Yet initial results indicate no decline in the number of bumiputras qualifying for tertiary education. Meritocracy may not be as difficult to achieve as had been thought. The second challenge is to reduce racial polarization. The approaches already adopted to close gaps in racial understanding include promoting mixed-race "Vision Schools," instituting three-month national service for school-leavers and promoting the use of English. This should continue.

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Next, Abdullah must continue the fight against corruption. "Money politics" has been the scourge of the ruling coalition in the past decade. The cynicism with which the United Malays National Organization was reduced to being a one-stop shop for handouts and favours famously drove Mahathir to tears. If progress has been made here, at least some is measured in the precocious wisdom of Umno's younger new members who say it's better to make your money before entering politics.

Lastly, Abdullah will be expected to work to eliminate extremism. Again, this shouldn't be hard. Acting decisively against murderous fanaticism accords entirely with the zero tolerance for political violence that Malaysia has always practised. Zealotry has been a dominant bugbear of the Mahathir government, which invoked the country's hetero-

geneity against efforts by the Islamic party, Pas, to raise a theocracy.

It should thus be apparent that Abdullah's challenge will be to continue Mahathir's plans for the country. Yet Abdullah's own term as prime minister will not see the completion of the journey Mahathir began. This will depend on the successor to Abdullah. Defence Minister Najib Razak seems certain to be named deputy premier on Abdullah's rise to the top office in October. Najib, the son of former Prime Minister Abdul Razak, should be keenly watched.

But saying Abdullah will continue Mahathir's agenda doesn't mean he will automatically be given carte *blanche*. Malaysia is a democracy, and Abdullah will need to prove himself to his constituency. What will follow his rise will be a brief honeymoon, when he will be free to make his mark before calling elections. Mahathir enjoyed just such a period after inheriting the premiership from Hussein Onn in 1981. By the time he went to the polls in August 1982, he had changed mindsets, shaken out the civil service and pledged a "clean, efficient and trustworthy" government. He was rewarded with 62% of the popular vote, clearing the way for his more radical socio-economic goals.

The outcome of the next election, which must be held by November 2004, will deeply influence Umno's decisions on its own leadership. Abdullah's prospects hinge on the electorate returning the desired verdict. But the National Front coalition that Umno leads should easily retain its two-thirds majority in an expanded 219-seat parliament, and may actually gain close to three-fourths of those seats.

The fortunes of Pas are critical. Umno wants to win back Terengganu state, lost to Pas in 1999 as much because of the Anwar affair as the unpopularity of the incumbent state administration. Pas is secure in its Kelantan state heartland but Umno may regain lost ground. Three other states-Kedah, Perlis and Pahang-will be barometers of Pas' prospects. Indeed, those who think Abdullah will be less combative with and more accommodating of religious politics may be right about the rhetoric, but wrong about the resolve.

Observing that Abdullah will not be "another Mahathir" is fatuous. Mahathir could not do what Abdullah has to do, which is to lead Malaysia out of the Mahathir era and towards the realization of Mahathir's Vision 2020. If Abdullah gets his way, the next five years in government should be clean, efficient and trustworthy. ■