

Cabinet remains

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PUTRAJAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has kept the cabinet he inherited from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad intact and deferred the appointment of his deputy.

Abdullah, who was sworn in on Friday, confirmed taking over the Finance Ministry, previously held by Mahathir, besides retaining the home portfolio.

"There is no immediate cabinet reshuffle. All ministers will remain where they are," he told a press conference yesterday after chairing his first cabinet meeting as prime minister.

On the appointment of a deputy prime minister, he said he is "not ready to make an announcement" but added that it will be someone who he can work with.

In a wide-ranging question and answer session, Abdullah again hinted that a general election, not due until the end of next year, could be held soon, saying "at the moment we are not certain we should have it this year. We will wait and see".

Reiterating that he will be aggressive against corruption, the prime minister directed ministries to immediately form task forces to reduce red tape "especially at our front-line counters".

Abdullah identified district offices, land offices and local government authorities as areas that need to be overhauled to make them more efficient. He also acknowledged that the workload of such front-line counters had increased tremendously over the years.

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"If there are areas where we need to increase manpower, we may do so. If not, other measures can also be implemented to help improve efficiency," he added.

He said the Chief Secretary to the Government (Tan Sri Samsudin Osman) will chair a special task force to re-engineer district offices. "We also take similar actions for the local governments," he said.

He said he had proposed to the cabinet the setting up of a "Public Ethics Institute" to educate the public on good governance and transparency. "We hope to achieve zero

corruption," he said.

On Kota Melaka MP and DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock's statement in parliament on Monday that DAP is prepared to work with him to make Malaysia a better and just place for all, Abdullah said: "That is positive. There are many areas and room where we can work for the good of everyone and the country.

"However, there are certain things that should not be politicised. Sensitive racial issues should not be politicised, likewise politics should not be brought to mosques."

Asked if PAS could also work with him, the prime minister said: "When I said in Penang, don't work for me but to work with me for the benefit of the country, it is directed at everyone, including PAS ... there is definitely room for cooperation.

"It also applies to all cabinet ministers who should continue to lead by example."

Describing Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's "No problem working with Abdullah" statement as a friendly sentiment, he said Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, also called to congratulate him. "I also do not see why there should be problems or obstacles."