

Police Report

An investigation into the powerful police department is a crowd-pleaser with political heft

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By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

IN 1996, Malaysian talk-show host Patrick Teoh tried to start a discussion on national radio about alleged corrupt practices by traffic policemen. His effort received a chilling rejoinder. The police questioned him four times, and the top police official threatened to file criminal defamation charges.

Few have tried to take on the police force since. So it was a surprise on December 29 when Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, after just two months in office, announced that the government would set up a royal commission to undertake a comprehensive review of the police force. "Issues like police brutality, lackadaisical attitudes, poor service, corruption and other negative traits must be eradicated," said the prime minister, who in his capacity as home minister is also in charge of the police.

Malaysia's police department is not just a local law-enforcement agency. It also plays a significant political role as the country's most powerful internal-security body, leading counter-terrorism activities, providing intelligence to the leadership and on occasion, under the controversial Internal Security Act, detaining without trial political activists and others considered to be threats to national security.

Abdullah's enquiry resonates with the repeated calls he has made to state officials to combat corruption. It also comes in response to fears expressed by Malaysia's expatriate community about increasing crime in the country. And if the enquiry is done well, it is likely to boost Abdullah's standing and improve the ruling coalition's chances in the next general election, which is widely expected to be held early next year.

The force's reputation over the past 20 years has deteriorated, as serious crime has risen. Between 1990 and 2000, the crime rate rose by more than 80% to 7.1 per 1,000 people, according to the Prime Minister's Department. Along with the increase in crime have come more allegations of corruption, police brutality and extrajudicial killings. In 1999,

respected lawyer Raja Aziz Addruse, citing 50 killings by police between 1996 and 1999 in what the police department called acts of self-defence, said the police "cannot act as judge, jury and executioner."

But it is corruption that bothers Malaysians the most. "Corruption in the force has got out of control," says a retired senior police officer who declined to be identified. "And this is a recent phenomenon. If this commission can stop it, more power to it."

Foreign investors as well are complaining more about the rising crime rate and a growing sense of insecurity. "Ambassadors' homes have been broken into," says a Western diplomat. "If Abdullah tackles crime head on, it will be a very popular thing."

A royal commission is a rarely convened body, usually headed by a judge and staffed by people seen to be of unimpeachable integrity. It is generally given sweeping investigative powers. Abdullah's predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, in his 22 years as premier, launched only one commission despite numerous calls by the opposition to do so. That commission investigated police brutality in response to public outrage after Mahathir's former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, appeared in court

with a black eye received while in police custody.

The call for a new enquiry is "an excellent idea," says former Deputy Premier Musa Hitam. "And it's coming from the government rather than the opposition as is the usual case."

Support for the enquiry was underscored as every single opposition party welcomed Abdullah's announcement. "It's populist, but it will also be very popular," says Jomo Sundaram, a political analyst and economist at the University of Malaya.

"There is a great deal of disenchantment and frustration among Malaysians over alleged excesses involving the police force."

Even the police might be sympathetic to Abdullah's commission. "It's a chance for them to tell their side of the story," argues Musa. "They aren't paid very well and there is low morale amongst them. These issues have to be addressed as well."

In many ways, Abdullah is also placing his neck on the line. "He's putting this before a very sceptical public who have heard it all before," says a senior government figure. "To make it stick, the whole exercise must be transparent and utterly believable."

Lim Kit Siang, the chairman of the opposition Democratic Action Party agrees: "The commission must comprise independent and credible commissioners, and results must be seen in months, not years." ■



TIME FOR A REVIEW: Abdullah (right) with police chief Bakri Omar

Teh Eng Koon/AP