

Not yet out of Mahathir's shadow

ECONOMIST 31.1.2004

KUALA LUMPUR

Abdullah Badawi (left) has done some good things, but the new prime minister has fought shy of the most important ones

MALAYSIANS are not used to wondering where their prime minister stands. Mahathir Mohamad, who quit the job last October after 22 years in office, never left them in any doubt, whether he was extolling his country's economic success, or berating the foreign financiers who, he claimed, were conspiring to undermine it.

His successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, by contrast, is a much less outspoken and more inscrutable figure. Malaysians are still trying to work out whether he is a cautious reformer—or merely a less voluble version of Dr Mahathir.

Mr Badawi does not pretend to be a revolutionary. He served as Dr Mahathir's deputy prime minister for almost five years and in other cabinet positions before that. What is more, Dr Mahathir's allies still dominate the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and the cabinet. No wonder, then, that Mr Badawi has proposed only gentle revisions to his predecessor's agenda: more openness and accountability in government, less corruption, fewer expensive prestige projects, more rural development and so on.

That much sounds positive enough. But Mr Badawi is only implementing such principles half-heartedly, and sometimes contradicts them. He has declared that the government should award contracts by open tender, instead of doling them out in

secret to favoured businessmen—but has not yet devised an official policy to that effect. He has broken with UMNO's tradition of shameless pork-barrel politics by appointing a technocrat as his deputy in the finance ministry, but has chosen Najib Tun Razak, an UMNO leader of the old school, as deputy prime minister.

Before he retired, Dr Mahathir had made clear that he wanted Mr Najib to get the job, which puts him next in the line of succession. Mr Badawi said he wanted to make up his own mind. Now, by choosing Mr Najib, Mr Badawi looks as though he is meekly following the doctor's orders.

To his credit, he has announced a commission to review the workings of the police force, widely viewed as corrupt and incompetent. But there is no telling yet how bold the commission will be, nor how readily the government will accept its recommendations. He has bravely taken decisions to delay a \$3.8 billion rail scheme and to cancel a contract relating to a huge, redundant dam. Yet these have been offset by continued government largesse for the biggest boondoggle of them all: Proton, the state-owned carmaker.

Meanwhile, some of the worst abuses of the Mahathir era have continued unabated. The police still deny opposition parties permits to hold public rallies and break up any gatherings held in defiance of the ban. Last week, they barged into an opposition party office and forcibly dis-

persed the members meeting there. A number of opposition activists are detained without trial. Those who do find themselves in court, such as Anwar Ibrahim, a former finance minister who fell from grace after he challenged Dr Mahathir, cannot count on a fair hearing.

In mid-January, after six months' reflection, an appeals court denied Mr Anwar bail. The same court also refused to review his conviction for sodomy (a crime in Malaysia), despite Mr Anwar's unchallenged alibi and even though his accuser is constantly changing his testimony. Mr Anwar is now waiting for the Federal Court, Malaysia's highest, to hear a further appeal in that case, to consider a new application for bail, and to review an earlier, equally suspect conviction for corruption.

But the court sets its own schedule and might not be ready to consider any of these petitions for years. The opposition cites such disappointments as proof that Mr Badawi is no different from Dr Mahathir. "Under Abdullah Badawi", says Muhamad Ezam Muhamad Nur of Mr Anwar's Keadilan party, "we are not moving towards democracy, we are moving towards a police state."

Mr Badawi's supporters, on the other hand, put his mixed performance so far down to lack of sufficient time and a proper mandate. He is using his first 100 days in office, they explain, to lay out his philosophy and air some policy ideas. These, they say, will serve as a platform in the election he is about to call, after which he will really begin to make his mark.

Both Mr Badawi's admirers and his detractors have a point. Dr Mahathir selected him as deputy leader of UMNO for his loyalty rather than for his flair. He might not have held on to the post, and thus inherited the leadership, had Dr Mahathir not forbidden other party members from chal-

▶ lenging him for it. So it can be argued that he really does need to prove himself at the polls before he can start to shake things up. In the meantime, he needs the support of UMNO heavyweights such as Mr Najib.

In the long run, both Mr Badawi and his team of bright young advisers do seem genuinely determined to clean up public life in Malaysia—hence the commission on the police, the new policy on public tenders and the cancellation of wasteful contracts. Unfortunately, though, Mr Badawi shows no interest in correcting Dr Mahathir's lamentable record on civil liberties. His advisers do not consider it a priority—indeed, one admits that they do not even have any potential reforms in mind. Mr Badawi, after all, is not likely to win big at the coming elections by giving freer rein to his political opponents. ■