

MALAYSIA

Taking Anger Out of Politics

FEER 19.2.2004

Gone is the bluster of former Premier Mahathir. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's political foes now must attack a leader who won't rise to the bait

By Leslie Lopez/KUALA LUMPUR

MALAYSIA'S OPPOSITION PARTIES, which pursued a platform of reform against former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's often autocratic rule, are discovering that the consensual style of his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, presents distinct political challenges as Malaysia gears up for elections widely expected to be called before mid-year.

"The dilemma for the opposition isn't whether they can gain fresh ground," says Khoo Boo Teik, a respected Malaysian political commentator and professor at the National Science University in Penang. "it's more a question of whether they can hold on to gains they snatched in the last elections."

Brought together by a host of issues ranging from anger over the sacking and subsequent jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to allegations of cronyism and corruption, Malaysia's disparate opposition parties made a strong showing in the November 1999 polls.

That election also revealed a worrying trend in multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysia. For the first time since the country gained independence in 1957, the results showed that there was a growing feeling, particularly among the country's ethnic Malays who comprise 60% of the population, that Islamic principles should have a greater role in government.

To be sure, changes so far have been more cosmetic than fundamental. Anwar still languishes in prison, gripes over corruption in government and business remain, and support for the Islamic opposition Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pas), appears to be intact, judging from the large crowds the party continues to attract for its many political programmes.

But a change in leadership can make a huge difference, especially in Southeast Asia where politics is so personalized and the mere perception of change can have a real-world impact. Mahathir's departure on October 31 after 22 years in power effectively robbed Malaysia's disparate opposition groups of the lightning rod that once brought them together. The former leader's combative disposition, a penchant for costly infrastructure projects often awarded to politically well-connected companies, and his disregard for the independence of institutions such as the judiciary provided the opposition with ample anti-government campaign fodder.

The Abdullah administration has craftily stolen the initiative from the opposition. Abdullah has steered a new course by displaying a fresh commitment to programmes in rural areas where most Malays live and shelving one costly infrastructure project. In the process, the new premier has often appeared to be following a similar reform agenda to that pursued by the jailed Anwar and his supporters. At the same time, Abdullah's unquestioned devotion to Islam has helped to blunt the appeal of Pas clerics.

Abdullah's promise to attack corruption has been particularly savvy. It has endeared him to the commercially driven ethnic-Chinese community, who make up just over 27% ▶▶

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of the country's population, and which has long played a deciding role in elections in Malaysia. "There is no denying, it is going to be very tough for us this time around," concedes Ezam Mohamed, a senior official of the National Justice Party, or Keadilan. "There is no doubt that Abdullah has taken on some of our issues," says Husam Musa, a Pas member of parliament. "But the voters, especially the younger set, are sophisticated enough to see that he has made many promises, but in terms of delivery, he has very little to show."

That sentiment may be put to the test soon. The government's current five-year term expires in November, but many analysts and politicians believe that Abdullah is likely to call for a vote before May to capitalize on the feel-good sentiment that his premiership has generated among many Malaysians.

While the ruling coalition, the National Front, won 148 of the 193 seats at stake in the last election, that 1999 vote also exposed a serious weakness. The coalition's leading party, the United Malays National Organization, or Umno, saw a substantial erosion of support in the Malay heartland, an amalgamation of five northern and eastern states in Peninsular Malaysia. The biggest beneficiaries were Pas and, to a lesser extent, mostly ethnic-Malay Keadilan. Pas retained control of Kelantan state and won control of the oil-rich state of Terengganu.

Politicians from Pas and Keadilan acknowledge that they have no chance of winning outright power in Malaysia any time soon, largely because of the overwhelming non-Malay support for the National Front, especially among ethnic Chinese. But the opposition has a longer-term strategy in mind: to chip away at Umno's support among Malays and thus undermine the party's standing as the dominant ethnic-Malay party and linchpin of the National Front.

That is why some of the toughest skirmishes in the next elections will be fought in the Malay heartland. The outcome will determine the future of Abdullah's role as national leader and Umno president. Fresh gains for Pas and Keadilan in the next elections, or, worse still, the loss of another Umno-con-

trolled Malay state to the opposition, could prove devastating to Abdullah's intra-party prestige. It could also invite an early challenge for the party's leadership when Umno holds its next triennial election, expected later this year. "He [Abdullah] can't afford to lose any ground" in the upcoming election, says an Umno division chief, who declined to be named.

ABDULLAH HAS ANGERED KEY UMNO MEMBERS

Even before the election, Abdullah's support within Umno is wobbly. Umno officials say that his recent decision to introduce competitive bidding in the award of government contracts hasn't gone down well with business people among Umno's rank-and-file, long accustomed to receiving projects and licences in return for political support. "The shaking-up that he is doing is rubbing the vested interests in Umno the wrong way, and they are waiting for him to trip," says the Umno division chief. A senior minister from Umno comments: "Umno's biggest enemy is Umno itself."

Another prickly issue for Abdullah is the continued incarceration of Anwar, which the opposition intends to use as one of its key campaign themes. Anwar's sacking and arrest in September 1998, his beating at the hands of the country's former police chief while in custody, and his long jail sentences for convictions on corruption and sexual-misconduct charges triggered deep divisions among many Malaysians, particularly Malays.

Worse, allegations and countercharges prompted by Anwar's trial stirred intense debate at home and abroad over the independence of Malaysia's institutions, particularly the police and the judiciary. Because many Malaysians believed Anwar's contention that he was a victim of a conspiracy engineered to prevent him from challenging Mahathir for power, the Anwar affair has come to symbolize the dark side of the Mahathir era.

Three weeks ago, the issue resurfaced when a Malaysian court rejected Anwar's application for bail pending his appeal against his conviction on sodomy charges, or for some form of parole to seek medical treatment overseas for injuries sustained during his 1998 beating. The court ruling, which was criticized by opposition politicians, also drew a sharp response from the United States, which urged the Malaysian government to "ensure that justice is served and that respect for human rights is upheld in Anwar's case."

Kuala Lumpur's reluctance to allow Anwar to seek treatment abroad is partly a sign of concern over his residual political muscle, say opposition politicians. "If the Abdullah government is serious about reform, it should do something over the Anwar issue. Keeping him in jail and denying him proper medical treatment is like giving him another black eye," says Keadilan's Ezam, referring to the widely publicized injury that Anwar received when he was beaten.

Should the Anwar issue gather steam, some analysts suggest that Abdullah could counter the problem before the polls by granting the jailed politician permission to seek medical treatment overseas. Such a manoeuvre "would definitely hurt us," admits Ezam. "But between losing [in the elections] and getting Anwar the best treatment, I don't mind losing." ■