

No More Mr. Nice Guy?

Abdullah is putting his own stamp on party politics

BY LORIEN HOLLAND

LAST OCTOBER, REFLECTING ON his 22 years in office, Malaysia's then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad credited much of his success to his blunt manner, declaring, "When people are nice and polite they never get anywhere." It was an odd thing to say, especially since his handpicked successor, Abdullah Badawi, is known as the Mr. Nice Guy of Malaysian politics. Long a fixture of the country's political elite, Abdullah is a consummate consensus builder, widely respected as an Islamic scholar and politician good at smoothing over differences. Months ago many predicted the soft-spoken leader would be easily cowed by his predecessor's powerful cronies and that Mahathir's shadow would render him weak and ineffectual. But as he marks his 100th day in office this week, Malaysia's new prime minister is showing he may be made of sterner stuff.

Abdullah has wasted no time in putting his stamp on the political scene. In December lucrative contracts handed out in the final days of Mahathir's reign were politely but firmly put on hold. In January Abdullah promised to combat corruption by opening the bidding process on big infrastructure projects, eliminating a system that had favored those with close government ties. In a nod to the nation's finely balanced ethnic mix, he broke ranks with his predecessors and sent Christmas cards to Malaysian church leaders. Even frigid relations with Singapore—one of the most negative legacies of Mahathir's tenure—look to be thawing. "He has done very well so far," says political analyst and former opposition leader Chandra Muzaffar. "He's addressed concerns which are uppermost in people's minds."

To be sure, Abdullah is still basking in the glow of being Malaysia's first new leader in more than two decades. The mood is upbeat—the economy grew by more than 4.5 percent in 2003—and he has avoided any serious political stumbles since taking office. His appointment last month of Najib Abdul Razak as deputy prime minister will bolster him further. Najib is popular within Abdullah's ruling party, the United Malays National Organization, whose elders the prime minister needs on his side.



A LONG SHADOW: Abdullah (seated) casts it off

But dangers remain, and many emanate from UMNO itself. With their entrenched hierarchies and patronage systems, many UMNO party members will not look kindly on Abdullah's push to curb some of the corrupt practices of old. Party elections are often more fiercely fought than general elections, and the prime minister may face his most serious opposition when the party convenes in June, particularly from middle-ranking members who have grown to view UMNO as the source of money and power in Malaysia. "When someone comes up with new ideas, there are always groups [within UMNO] who want to maintain the status quo," says Khoo Kay Kim, a history professor at the University of Malaya. Even Abdullah's modest reform agenda could get

bogged down by petty political dealmaking. "In our political system, those who defend the status quo usually have the advantage."

First, though, the 64-year-old Abdullah must win a political mandate. General elections are due this year, most likely in March. While Abdullah and the ruling coalition—in which UMNO partners with ethnic Chinese and Indian political parties—are in no danger of losing outright, the size of their majority will be read as an important bellwether of the new prime minister's staying power. Abdullah is looking to win back many of the seats lost in the 1999 elections, in particular those in the northern Muslim Malay heartlands, where the leading opposition, the religiously conservative Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or PAS, has made significant inroads. "Abdullah needs a strong mandate in the Malay heartlands," says PAS parliamentarian Syed Azman. "Of course that is where we are concentrating, and we are in an upbeat mood."

With the political contest in the heartland tight, few analysts will venture a guess as to how the vote will play out. PAS's central plank remains the creation of an Islamic state, and it has drummed up significant support among Malays—who make up almost two thirds of the country's population—by highlighting alleged corruption and lack of transparency in the UMNO-led government. In the

last elections, anger over the 1998 jailing of Mahathir's former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, drove more Muslim Malays into the PAS camp.

Fortunately for Abdullah, Anwar's imprisonment is less of a battle cry than it was five years ago. And UMNO's best defense against PAS could well be Abdullah himself. Hailing from a long line of Muslim scholars, he is well versed in the Qur'an—an attribute that could lure rural Malay voters back to the party. His push for transparency could also prove more popular outside the party than within it. Beating back any further PAS advances may, in turn, be the only way for Abdullah to strengthen his hand within UMNO—and prove that nice guys don't always finish last. ■

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