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Not a bad start for new PM, says article

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - An article in the International Herald Tribune has said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's combination of competence and modest demeanour may have given him superior credentials in Southeast Asia where leadership is lacking or lacks appropriate modesty.

"Not a bad start for Malaysia's new Prime Minister" was the title of an article by Philip Bowring published in today's edition of the IHT.

Abdullah's "competence and modest demeanour" were noted in his approach to mega projects and his all-out attack against corruption.

"Abdullah is so far making the most of his reputation as a modest man, surprising those who believed that to be inoffensive was to be ineffective," Bowring wrote.

The article said that since Abdullah came into power, "several grandiose public projects (were) placed under review. Appointments ... have emphasised professionalism expected by a prime minister who was once a civil servant himself.

"Corruption is now acknowledged to be a major problem and the anti-corruption agency has sprung back to life. A public ethics institute is being established and a commission will examine the ... credibility of the police".

Bowring said Abdullah appealed to Malays with his "courteous manner" and religious credentials "which he does not wear on his sleeve".

At a time when Pas has assumed a more extremist stand, Abdullah's "pluralistic approach to social and religious issues" put him in good stead.

Abdullah's reputation for honesty, belief in public institutions and freedom from being "in thrall of big business" indicated the onset of a freer Malaysia, Bowring wrote.

"There is a reasonable chance that the independence of the bureaucracy and judiciary ... will revive".

Abdullah's style seems to hint that he would try to forge a Malaysia where "quality counts more than quantity, where integrity matters", the article said.

Despite a markedly different style from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah was expected to follow his predecessor in the gradual reduction of Malay privileges, promoting a personal faith for Muslims and ethnic integration in schools.

Among Abdullah's international achievements were taking a less "abrasive posture" towards the United States and Singapore, and implementing car tariffs under the Asean Free Trade Area agreement, Bowring noted.

Describing the coming general election and Umno election as the "biggest political tests", Bowring said both would show Abdullah's ability to "dominate a notoriously faction-ridden organisation".

There was also a comment on the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, that he was the "best choice of the three most senior Umno office-holders".