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A clear and simple brief

WHAT the Prime Minister told his inaugural Cabinet on Wednesday was more important than anything he had said to the nation on the campaign trail. That campaign was one resounding promise emphatically made, repeated and inscribed for all time in the Barisan Nasional's 2004 manifesto. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the BN promised us a nation where corruption is loathsome and honesty noble; where efficiency and integrity combine; where things are done properly. He promised us a nation empowered, productive, and working in the way intended by its builder, his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

What Abdullah told his Cabinet two days ago, however, was how he intends to keep that promise. It had won him a mandate not only greater than that bestowed on Dr Mahathir in 1995, but exceeding even the historically unassailable performance of Tun Razak in 1974, when the brand-new Barisan Nasional was embraced as the nation's salvation after the collapses of 1969. Beyond question now, Abdullah has ushered in a new era.

In the process, the country has acquired a Parliament containing nearly half as many seats as India's for a population one-fiftieth the size - with the BN controlling an unprecedented nine-tenths of them. The Government has concomitantly expanded, with two new ministries and eight restructured, 33 ministers, 39 deputy ministers and 21 new parliamentary secretaries. It was to their leading echelon - the Cabinet - that Abdullah issued the instructions he will rely on to keep the BN's promises.

The task could not be larger, but those instructions could not be simpler. The PM merely reminded his Cabinet that by now everyone knows what they must do, and all he asks is that they do it right and do it well, because if they don't it'll hurt like hell.

The election campaign, some say, was unseemly brief. But neither have there been any prolonged celebrations, holidays, or even time off. Instead, Malaysia's renewed and expanded Government is re-installed and operational, with barely enough time for some of its officers to locate their new premises. This is how the Abdullah administration begins, and obviously how he would wish it to continue: At work.