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Abdullah: My candidates must withstand voter scrutiny

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - In his clearest signal to date that the general election may be held soon, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today spelt out clearly that he would only choose credible candidates who could "withstand the scrutiny of Malaysian voters".

Giving the Prime Ministerial Address to the Cambridge Foundation tonight, Abdullah's speech was peppered with comments on the forthcoming general election, not due until November but widely expected to be held as early as the second quarter.

While he expressed confidence of better electoral results, Abdullah warned that the wrong choice of candidates could easily nullify "the feel-good factor we enjoy today".

"There used to be a saying that Umno could put up a songkok to contest and that the songkok would win. Voter choice today has changed markedly. There is less party affiliation among voters. People are more concerned with issues and the credibility of individual candidates.

"Voters have become more discerning and rightly so. They must make an informed decision on who will be their representative. This requires candidates whose appeal goes beyond party circles. The candidate must be a winner among the rakyat and not merely a party warlord," said Abdullah, who is acting Umno president and will have the last say on the choice of candidates.

Abdullah's comments were his most pointed yet regarding the choice of candidates. In the past, Umno members who held positions within the party, whether at Federal, State or divisional level, were the preferred choice when it came to selecting candidates.

He spelt out today that he wants "a higher level of accountability among representatives of the people".

"As elected representatives, we hold our position and offices in trust from the people. If we violate this trust, the people have every right to vote us out of office.

"Political leaders must be measured against higher standards. In an age when the voter is much better informed, where policy issues are far more complex and where constituents are far more mixed and diverse, those who seek public office must be benchmarked against a more stringent set of criteria.

"As chairman of the Barisan Nasional, I need to ensure that our candidates are credible and can withstand the detailed scrutiny of Malaysian voters.

"An observation that I have often heard is that people have no problems with BN or Umno.

"In fact, they support the ideology and policies we stand for. But they are driven away by the presence of personalities that are discredited.

"It is for this reason that I have begun reviewing the performance of all BN elected representatives to see if they have lived up to the trust that has been given them by the rakyat."

Abdullah also touched on his first 100 days in office.

Obviously referring to cynics, in particular oppositionists who had disdained his statements and policy initiatives as "mere talk" despite the strong support he had received from Malaysians, he said:

"My first 100 days was my statement of intent. Now we get to work and walk the talk."

Expressing satisfaction that the agenda he had outlined for the Government had been accepted, he said that he was under "no illusion" that victory could be gained "just by saying the right things".

"We must do what we say," he said, adding that his agenda was neither mere lip service nor electioneering.

Abdullah said whether it were creating a more efficient public administration, eradicating corruption, cutting red tape or strengthening institutions such as the police, his commitment to these objectives was total and unwavering.

"I am aware that there are now high expectations of my administration. This is a far cry from the very low expectations that people had before I took office. Realising these expectations will require everybody in my administration to pull their weight."

He called attention to the promises made by his Cabinet colleagues, civil servants and other political leaders to work with him and pursue the objectives he had set, saying he would "hold them to their word".

"What I have set out to do is to bring the Government back to the people. Government serves the people and its policies must empower the people with opportunities, rights and responsibilities.

"A broader base for economic growth with renewal in the rural sector empowers people.

"Eliminating graft and ensuring that the public is not held ransom to discretionary delays empowers people.

"My invitation to you to work with me empowers you."

Abdullah also paid tribute to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, saying it was due to the former Prime Minister's consistently far-sighted policies and excellent crisis management that the country entrusted to Abdullah was "confident, resilient, dynamic and progressive".

In many ways, he said, inheriting success was as difficult as taking over at a time of crisis.

"While succeeding in such a situation is not easy, you begin at a lower base with a lot of upside.

"In my situation, the upside is not so obvious, but the downside is patently clear. I have, therefore, made it my priority to manage the success that Dr Mahathir has bequeathed to this nation."