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Curb the `tidak apa' malaise and forge ahead

By Ramon Navaratnam

THE honeymoon is over. No, not for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who took over the reins of Government eight months ago.

For Abdullah, there was no honeymoon to speak of after he took over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last October.

It had been work and work and he acquitted himself admirably on the economic front, and on the political field, he led Barisan Nasional to a massive win in the March general election, a win which many said was attributable to the charisma of the man.

He has been given the unanimous thumbs up to be the Umno president and last week, he returned from a successful visit to the United States, France and Britain, where he also spoke on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement as their chairman.

This visit will help pave the way for more foreign investments, now that foreign businesses know what the Malaysian position is all about and what the country has to offer.

As for the honeymoon being over, it concerns Malaysian businessmen and businesses in Malaysia.

The Budget deficit continues and, hence, there will be fewer big government projects to finance.

Businessmen will have to get more contracts from the private sector and seek more business opportunities and infrastructure projects overseas.

But to effectively compete abroad, Malaysian companies must go for quality, rather than mere quantity.

At the same time, Malaysians from both the private and public sectors must also strive to give quality service in order to attract local and foreign businesses.

Regretfully, we find in many areas of government and business, the tidak apa attitude or what our Prime Minister had previously described as the "Malaysian malaise". It is not that Malaysians are not capable.

Petronas is showing the way. It is an outstanding example of a world-class Malaysian company which has made its mark abroad, and is now listed as a Fortune 500 company.

Hard work, efficiency, the mission to serve the Government or company, and not the individual, were what took Petronas to where it is today.

The late Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, who was at the helm of Petronas, was a paragon of management virtue and excellence.

Petronas should, therefore, be held up as the bench mark for government departments, government-linked companies (GLCs) and private companies.

The Petronas way should be the way to go for all of them.

The Government will need to introduce a rating system using the Key Productivity Indices (KPIs) to grade the performances of ministries and departments under various categories.

Ministers and senior officials can also be given more powers to hire, fire and reward staff on a new basis of decentralised government, which is practised in some more progressive countries.

This could see more efficiency and productivity in the Government and the economy.

But for now, we continue to see this "Malaysian malaise" afflicting many areas.

Most local authorities are inefficient. Garbage is not properly collected, floods occur frequently, roads are badly maintained, licensing

of small businesses and food stalls is haphazard, health conditions are poor and corruption is present.

At the federal level, hospitals are overcrowded, schools and universities suffer from falling standards, the environment has steadily deteriorated and public safety has sadly declined.

Pockets of poverty and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups still persist.

These are some signs of the "Malaysian malaise" and poor quality of implementation. But there must be a new urgent drive to change this tidak apa attitude.

The Prime Minister said last month that the huge mandate he received at the general election "means higher expectations - probably giving rise to impatience" for greater and faster positive change and progress.

He is right on this score. But he may be slightly off the mark when he says that "at this time, I can say there is still the good feeling".

The rising impatience could slowly erode this "good feeling".

Abdullah added that he had started fighting corruption, enhancing efficiency and reducing bureaucracy, but that these measures may not show obvious results yet.

But as the Prime Minister stated, people are nevertheless asking: "Pak Lah, what's happening?"

One way to answer this vital question is to ensure that the Government implements the many election pledges as soon as possible.

The quarterly reports required from Members of Parliament could also be made available to the public without delay.

The Prime Minister pursued this vital need for greater quality when he announced that the Government is drawing up a "brain gain" programme to attract more Malaysian talent home.

But more importantly, we should also implement specific plans to discourage the growing brain drain in the first place.

We have to carefully examine the root causes of this debilitating brain drain. Only then can we make the brain gain proposals succeed.

The main problem of this brain drain is, according to the Prime Minister, the inadequate "quality opportunities".

Thus, we must quickly establish a more equitable and merit-based environment to retain and attract our best brains. Otherwise, we will continue to have a faster brain drain - and a slower brain gain.

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