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Prayers will be the only help for those implicated in wrongdoing

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DURING his first Cabinet meeting after leading the Barisan Nasional to victory in the recent general election, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told his new and old colleagues that he expected them to do the right thing always.

If along the way, they made honest mistakes, he promised to stand by them, recalled Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, one of the 14 new ministers in Abdullah's Cabinet.

But if they did the wrong thing knowingly, he made clear that he would stand aside and let the law take its course. That would be his policy even if the case involved good friends like Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

His statement provoked good-natured howls from Dr Lim and laughter all around, Maximus noted, but every member of the new administration knew exactly where the Prime Minister stood on graft.

In the days that followed, the message was repeated to other members of the administration - the Prime Minister's aides, Members of Parliament, State Assemblymen, Chief Ministers and Menteri Besar.

If any of them had lingering doubts about Abdullah's conviction to tackle corruption, it should have been cleared up on Wednesday.

On that day, one of Abdullah's very close friends, Datuk Azman Mahalan, was charged in an Ipoh court with corruption. Over money politics. Over a sum of RM7,000.

Money politics has been a niggling problem in Umno for years.

So much so, former Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had to cajole and even shed tears at the 1995 Umno general assembly when pleading with party members to discard and treat corruption as an evil.

In some of the cases, reports may not have been lodged with the Anti-Corruption Agency or the police. In other cases, there may not have been enough evidence to take the matter to court.

In Azman's case, the prosecutors felt they had enough evidence to charge him.

Not many know of the close relationship between Azman and Abdullah.

A former Immigration officer based in Pengkalan Hulu, my hometown, Azman has always been an easy going man, making friends easily.

It was tough for people like me to see Azman being charged as he was a good friend of my late father. It was tough for Berita Harian group editor Hishamuddin Aun as Azman is his uncle.

But tough as it was for us to see Azman's photograph being splashed on the front pages of the newspapers we manage, it was tougher for Abdullah.

His aides say that he has been quite affected by the arrest of his friend.

When Abdullah was sacked from the Cabinet in 1987 for going against Dr Mahathir in party elections, many friends and supporters deserted him and he cut a lonely figure, though he remained an Umno vice-president.

In the 1993 Umno elections, when the Anwar Ibrahim juggernaut ran over anything or anyone who did not support him, Azman was one of few who stood by Abdullah when it was not fashionable or politically expedient to do so.

He became a "true friend" in Abdullah's eyes.

During a discussion with his aides last week, Abdullah suddenly took three pens and put them side by side on his table.

A friend, the policy and the law - these are what the three pens

depicted. All three, he told his aides, were separate, indicating there was nothing he could do.

"He is my friend, my true friend," he rued.

Before the general election, DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang asked my views as a newspaperman on how serious Abdullah was in his fight against graft.

I said he was serious. So serious that even his friends feared crossing the line, knowing they would not be afforded any protection.

When then Minister Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam met Abdullah just before he was charged with corruption in February, the Prime Minister encouraged him to clear his name in court.

In the case of Azman, it must also be Abdullah's prayer that his friend can prove his innocence.

Prayers will be the only help Abdullah's other colleagues and members of the administration can hope for should they, too, be implicated in any wrongdoing.