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Agenda is settled, and now the wait for endorsement

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WILL the results of the general election endorse Pak Lah's mission to reprogramme Malaysia's `software' for the future? KALIMULLAH HASSAN traces the genesis of the Prime Minister's extensive agenda.

SHORTLY after he became Prime Minister in October last year, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi chaired an Umno supreme council meeting. One of the topics raised was the general election.

Some members of the council expressed strong views, urging him to have an election by April to coincide with the dissolution of the Sabah State Assembly on April 12.

There were various reasons presented. Some wanted a simultaneous election with Sabah to avoid two campaigns, to save costs or to enable the Barisan Nasional to have the advantage because the opposition parties could not spread themselves so thin in a nationwide election.

Others felt that the economy was improving and popular support had risen since 1999, when Umno saw an erosion of Malay votes over the Anwar Ibrahim issue. The first quarter of 2004 or immediately after would be best, they said, as Abdullah would have settled into his new job by then.

Abdullah listened but was non-committal.

He could see the merits of the arguments, but he felt that if he were to seek the mandate as the new leader of Malaysia, he had first to tell the electorate what his administration's agenda would be.

Only then could he truly say that he had the people's support for what he wanted to do for the country. Only then could he, with empowerment from the people, carry out his plans.

He made it clear to his aides right from the beginning that he had no desire to overhaul the policies of his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad just for the sake of leaving his own footprints.

From the day that Dr Mahathir announced he was going to retire - June 22, 2002 - Abdullah was resolute in stating that the good policies would remain because they had benefited the country and the people.

But he was also unambiguous in stating that he wanted to focus on the "software" side of Malaysia - changing mindsets, improving efficiency, cutting red tape and, most of all, cracking down on corruption, which he believed was a root cause of evil and directly related to creating inefficiency and red tape.

Reducing or even eradicating corruption in both private and public sectors would drastically reduce the cost of business, improve efficiency, ensure faster implementation of projects and ultimately benefit Malaysians.

And so he proceeded with his announcements and directives. He visited frontline departments such as Immigration, told Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers to overhaul their land offices, set up a Royal Commission on the Police, called off the RM14 billion railway double-tracking project to avoid worsening the fiscal deficit, and directed the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) to act against both the private and public sectors if they had enough evidence.

In his first three months in office, Abdullah addressed the issues that increasingly concerned a Malaysia burgeoning on the back of the Mahathir period of growth.

That took the wind from the sails of opposition parties which had worn out the Anwar issue and were harping on the concerns over corruption, red

tape, abuse of power and inefficiency.

With his agenda stated, his ministers supportive, and his public ratings up, Abdullah then decided to seek the mandate he wanted.

The ideas and issues he wanted to address were not a vision that came to him overnight after he became Prime Minister.

Abdullah's aides, such as his former Press secretary Datuk Kamarulzaman Zainal, and friends such as Datuk Mohamed Abid have many fond stories to relate of the characteristics that earned him the "Mr Clean" tag.

In February 1999, barely a month into his job as Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah was tasked with heading the election campaign in Sabah's State election.

Kamarulzaman remembers him meeting senior Sabah journalists. At a no-holds-barred Press conference, he was asked about his vision for the country.

His answer to that question then and four years later was the same. That he had the same vision as Dr Mahathir to see Malaysia become a developed nation by 2020. He was then asked whether he had any personal standpoint that he might want to enlarge upon as the country's second most powerful person.

His reply was: "I would like to see an incorruptible and efficient civil service. I would like to have an incorruptible public sector. If we can achieve that, our country will progress faster."

Kamarulzaman also remembers the ominous period of money politics in Umno in 1993, when Abdullah was fighting to retain his post as party vice-president.

"A divisional leader from Sabah called him and pledged support. In return, he asked for RM100,000 to give to supporters. Pak Lah told him that even if he had the money, he would not give it to him."

Kamarulzaman says Abdullah told the Sabah leader, "I cannot give money. I can only contribute my energy, my thoughts and my services for Umno and for the country."

Abdullah lost by a small margin in that election but after a clampdown on money politics by Dr Mahathir the following year, Abdullah won the post at the 1996 party elections.

Abdullah's friend Mohamed says not many people know that the Prime Minister does not own a house. As a civil servant and later as a minister in Government for 23 years until 1987, all Abdullah had were two houses - one in Titiwangsa and another in Bangsar.

But after he was dropped from the Cabinet in 1987 for opposing Dr Mahathir in a power tussle in Umno, he was jobless for almost four years. He sold his houses to support his family and his political activities.

Mohamed recalls that those were lonely years and not having any money, it was a few close friends like his classmate and political secretary, the late Datuk Haji Abdul Fatah Abdullah, and Kamarulzaman, who supported and helped him.

Mohamed has been Abdullah's friend for close to 30 years. He says: "There are no skeletons in his closet. That is why he can stand tall and confident when he talks against abuse and corruption.

"As a person, he has not changed. He is still the same Abdullah I first met. He and Endon (Mahmood) are as close and as loving as they were then. He still hugs and greets his friends like he did before. That is his charm.

"I just wish Haji Fatah was alive to see his childhood friend today," Mohamed said. Fatah, who was also Abdullah's political secretary for many years, died just months after his friend became Deputy Prime Minister.

Coming from a family of renowned religious leaders, Abdullah started fine-tuning his programmes as Malaysia's leader soon after Dr Mahathir

told him he would retire in October 2003.

There were many midnight sessions at his home with his aides, including Dr Mahathir's own advisers such as Datuk Johari Baharom and others, including leading economists and intellectuals, on how to address the issues facing the people.

Drafts were drawn up and redrafted. The ultimate objective, he told his closest aides, was to serve, and their job was to take his views and chart the initiatives to take the country the next step forward.

It was in those gruelling sessions that the blueprint of his roadmap for the country was drawn up.

He has outlined his plans in the last four months. The response has been largely positive.

Today, he seeks the mandate to carry them out.