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Abdullah denies anti-corruption drive stalled, defends Cabinet size

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - who secured Malaysia's biggest-ever election victory by promising a cleaner, more efficient government - has denied his anti-corruption campaign has stalled and rejected criticism his Cabinet is bloated.

In an interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review published today on the Internet, Abdullah said political reality had hampered his ability to cull politicians appointed by his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, from the Cabinet after his landslide win in March.

Abdullah, who was Dr Mahathir's deputy until the longtime leader retired in October, campaigned on a platform of returning to a tightly-run and open government after 22 years of big spending and allegations of cronyism under Dr Mahathir.

But when he named his Cabinet - widely seen as an opportunity for Abdullah to powerfully stamp his authority on the government - the new leader kept almost all of Dr Mahathir's appointments, and brought in new blood by expanding the Cabinet to more than 30 ministers.

Asked by the magazine whether Cabinet positions shouldn't go to the most qualified people, Abdullah replied: "That's easier said than done, and it's just not practical."

Abdullah said when making the appointments he had to keep in mind that he was leader of a political party, not just the government, and that he must also look after his partners in the National Front ruling coalition.

"Look, I also have 14 political parties to take care of," he was quoted as saying. "Every one of them wants representation - that's what we call power sharing."

In contrast to the image he sought during the election campaign, when opposition groups sought to paint him as the continuation of Dr Mahathir-style rule, Abdullah stressed that "I am not bringing in a new regime. There's only a change of leadership."

But he denied his anti-corruption campaign had ground to a halt. "No, it's going on," Abdullah told the magazine. "But I can't be talking about it every day as if I'm going to be a one-issue man."

As Dr Mahathir's successor going into the election, Abdullah launched a crackdown that saw one Dr Mahathir-era tycoon and a junior minister charged with fraud and corruption-related offences, amid warnings of more to come.

Abdullah also shelved some large-scale projects approved by Dr Mahathir, promised that all government contracts would be subject to open tender, and called an inquiry into alleged widespread corruption and abuse in the police force.

But no new high-profile corruption arrests have been made, no announcements of open tenders, and the police inquiry has struggled to attract public support, leading opposition groups and others to speculate that Abdullah's anti-graft drive may be petering out.

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