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Taking care of local needs

AFTER he succeeded Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi unveiled a package of policy initiatives ranging from alleviating poverty to making the award of government contracts more transparent. His reform agenda has so captured the hearts and minds of the Malaysian public that the Barisan Nasional won an emphatic victory at the polls. The massive mandate reflects a desire for change in the way things are done. This is why his pledge to act against corruption and get rid of red tape struck such a deep chord.

To deliver his promises, Abdullah has to ensure that not only the elected representatives at the Federal and State levels but also the non-elected officials in the local governments are effective and responsive to the needs of the people. While the Prime Minister has already put in place policy and institutional changes to beef up the civil service and improve the delivery of public services, it is mostly the responsibility of the State Governments to ensure that local authorities become more accountable to the public and perform their functions as a service provider and facilitator of development more effectively.

The growing number of citizens watch groups, neighbourhood associations and other civil society organisations will no doubt be monitoring whether the assurance of transparency and integrity will be achieved at the local government level. They will no doubt be also looking at other issues such as the protection of the environment and improvement in the quality of life. As many State Assemblymen and Members of Parliament have found, when local councils fail to clear clogged drains or repair potholes despite repeated complaints, dissatisfied citizens will turn to them for redress. Many voters gauge the performance of their elected representatives on their ability to solve such bread-and-butter issues. It is vital that the local councils are enhanced because the ability of the Prime Minister to make good on his undertaking depends just as much on the competence of local governments as it does on the effectiveness of the Federal and State Governments.