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Think national, says Abdullah (HL)

By Balan Moses

SHAH ALAM, Sat. - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today gently reminded the various race-based Barisan Nasional component parties to stick to the "rules of the game" - giving priority to national rather than communal interests.

The Prime Minister, a staunch proponent of multi-ethnic, multi-religious harmony, reminded Malaysians that mutual respect, moderation and the common national interest must take priority over communal interests.

He said that while it was the duty of the component parties to raise issues that affected their communities, "the rules of the game are that we should ensure that national interest, our common interest, supersede communal interests when we make requests of the Government.

"We want a united nation where all of us succeed together," he said.

Since he became Prime Minister in October last year, Abdullah has reiterated many times that although he is a Malay and a Muslim, he is "Prime Minister of all Malaysians".

In keeping with his promise of "walking the talk", Abdullah has given priority to interacting with and meeting the various communities and religions, including taking the unprecedented step of being the first Muslim leader in the world to address the World Council of Churches conference held here last month.

However, officials said Abdullah had been disappointed that there were times when some people raised issues that did not take into consideration the feelings of other races and religions.

One incident that affected him, officials associated with him said, was when a member of the Bar Council had in its online bulletin, Infoline, referred to the Muslim call to prayer, the azan, as "noise pollution".

This had elicited angry responses from many Muslims. Abdullah himself was unhappy with the remarks and felt such insensitivity did nothing for inter-religious harmony.

Abdullah did not allude to that incident but in a 28-minute off-the-cuff speech when opening the 58th MIC general assembly, he dwelt at length on how the BN had successfully handled issues of race and religion and why such sensitivity had to prevail for the sake of the nation.

"We want a united nation where all of us succeed together. The Government wants to ensure that no group or race is left behind or isolated. We want to grow together in development," he said, adding that the BN's "politics of consensus" had served the nation well.

He said all major issues involving the various races were agreed upon using this principle after they had been debated in the Cabinet or the state executive councils.

"All have the right to speak, even if the issue involves matters related to specific races or specific religions. In the BN style, we are always confident that we can discuss all issues, even if they involve sensitive topics, in a wise manner and come to a consensus.

"The key to this is that we must respect each other and engage in discussions in an attitude of moderation."

He said no Malaysian Prime Minister had been unfair when formulating policies meant for all races.

Abdullah promised the same commitment to the nation and said he would always hold to the principle of consensus in decision-making.

The Prime Minister also touched on the issue of national schools, which

he said should be the first choice of Malaysians as they were an excellent forum for interaction among children of all races.

He said the Government constantly worked on raising the quality of education at such schools to make them attractive for Malaysians of all races.

This included the teaching of mother tongue languages, including Mandarin and Tamil, as well as foreign languages such as French and Arabic.

"We are working hard to make national schools the first choice of Malaysians. I am not saying that the national-type Tamil or Chinese schools should be closed down. We want to give you a choice," Abdullah said.

Urging Malaysians not to reject national schools, he said the Government had no objection to the teaching of Mandarin or Tamil in such schools as the languages came from nations which were leading economic powers in the world.

"It is not wrong to teach Mandarin in national schools. Malays can also learn Mandarin. They do not cease to be Malays if they speak Mandarin. What is wrong with teaching Tamil in such schools?"

Abdullah said that while there were numerous benefits in learning other languages, Malaysians should always remember the need to master Bahasa Malaysia, "which is our national language".

While vernacular languages should be taught in national schools, he said Bahasa Malaysia should always be given its due importance and English should be taught as a second language because of its inherent advantages.

The Prime Minister was happy that MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had stressed the need for government assistance to enable Indians to pursue higher education.

Abdullah also assured non-Muslims that they had nothing to fear from Islam Hadhari and reiterated his oft-repeated message that "I am not the leader of Muslims but a Muslim who is the leader of all Malaysians", drawing applause from the 2,000 delegates.

Abdullah said Islam required Muslim leaders to be fair and just when judging people under their care.

"It is the command of my Lord that we must be just when we judge others," he said, adding that he would ensure that the implementation of policies would be fair and just.

"So have no fear of Islam Hadhari. It is a new approach to Islam to make it progressive and moderate."

Abdullah urged Malaysians of all faiths to work together to reject extremism and work for the common good.

He said Malaysia's diversity should be something to be celebrated and not become a divisive factor.

"Let us work together. Work with the Government. Work with me for the future of Malaysia."

Also present were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Cabinet members.

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