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Abdullah Badawi's own inimitable style

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's style of administration as Prime Minister will likely be consultative and approachable, but firm in moral and political courage, said New Straits Times Group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad today.

Speaking at the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College on "Current issues in Malaysian politics", Abdullah said the current acting Prime Minister would lead with his own style.

"He has a more consultative style, a willingness and, some say, too generous patience in listening to others' views."

He said it would, however, be a serious error to underestimate Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's ability to say no to those with whom he disagreed.

"Some people are already finding that out. His strength is that he is, unlike some leaders now strutting the political stage, uncorrupted by cynicism and the divisiveness of personality-based politics.

"More importantly, he has an idealistic commitment to create a new sense of national interest and purpose," said Abdullah.

He said Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not lack moral or political courage, and was a leader who had been tested many times including being a "non-person" at one time.

"He has never lost his moderate ways and impeccable character. He is a religious man in a real world," he said.

He added that Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stood in good stead to handle the four main challenges that would be left behind by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad:

- * Revising the national education system which must restore the status of the English language to the forefront without sacrificing the national language, and overhaul the religious education system, particularly with the necessary reformation of the Sekolah Agama Rakyat,

- * Return to meritocracy, that is the gradual repeal of protectionist preferential policies,

- * National integration, and;

- * Containment of religious extremism, fanaticism, racial chauvinism, and linguistic fascism.

"Certainly, there will be a new style and tone to political leadership. Abdullah is not Dr Mahathir. There can never be another Dr Mahathir. At the same time, comparisons of Abdullah and Dr Mahathir do justice to neither man.

"Perhaps, after 23 years of the Mahathir administration, it would do the country some good to have a change of pace at the top."

He also said those who thought that Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would be deficient or lacking as a Prime Minister and president of Umno would be very wrong.

"They would be best advised not to test him, or they too will be holding handkerchiefs to their bloody noses," he said.

He said there would be changes across the board, and through the rank-and-file of the public sector and corporate Malaysia.

"We should see new managers, younger, and better educated and better trained, rising to the helm of Malaysia Inc. We should see new blood emerge and rise in politics too.

"In Umno, the Youth and Puteri wings seem to be up to their role of nurturing new leadership. Umno's BN partners are also, to greater or

lesser degrees, finding the fresh talent to carry on the national struggle.

"Malaysia and Umno will continue to manage transition and change for the sake of continuity of the things that matter most to us - peace, prosperity, harmony, stability and security," said Abdullah.

On the question of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's running mate, he said: "I would be damned surprised if it was not Datuk Seri Najib Razak - your minister," to some polite applause from the audience.

"Abdullah is an experienced politician; he knows what's best for himself, his administration and Umno."

Abdullah predicted that BN would win a substantial number of seats in the next general election, far better than its performance in 1999, although some critics say that it would have to face the so-called disenfranchised 680,000 new voters registered just before the last election.

"I think this eight to 10 per cent of the national electorate should not pose any challenge," he said, adding that he, however, did not think the BN would win Kelantan.

"Maybe the Kelantan Umno will win a few more seats. Terengganu Umno has a brighter prospect. In Kedah, Perlis and to a certain extent Pahang, Pas may still hope for inroads at the next election.

"All this depends on what Umno does or doesn't do between now and D-day," he said.

Umno has to rebuild itself as a party of mass and popular participation.

"It must shape up, become leaner and a health freak, and have zero tolerance for corruption, internal bickering, power jostling and inefficiency. But more importantly, it must be brave enough to retire the inconsequential leaders, whose long reign have brought more heartaches than political fortunes to the party."

He also also touched on MCA's problems, noting that it might erode the support of the Chinese community for it as a political party of first choice.

"Internal issues must be resolved fast otherwise MCA will find itself debilitated and possibly marooned on an island of political disrespect and scorn. Once respect is eroded, it is hard to regain it," he said.

MIC, he added, under the leadership of Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had gone against all odds.

"At a time when one thinks the Indian community's support for it is shaven off by what is alleged as party shenanigans, Samy Vellu sprang new follicles of seeming stability in the party," he added.

He said the danger to BN's political hegemony and national unity and stability was Pas which was trying very hard to feign a modern and democratic look.

"Its ideological orthodoxy is very much intact. Its highly theocratic and ultra-conservative Islamic theology is non-negotiable," he added.

He, however, believed that more voters recognised that the mainstream in Malaysia was a good and useful place to be, and certainly a better place than anywhere Pas could take the country.

"Still, never, never underestimate Pas," said Abdullah.

On DAP, he said it had to rejuvenate itself, purge the autocratic elements from the party and craft an ideological terrain upon which it can identify.

"It made the error of believing that it could happily be the second or third wife of Pas. The lesson from DAP's dismal electoral performance in the past general elections is that it is not enough to debunk the fears of the Chinese and non-Malays, but it is also necessary to address their legitimate concerns about an Islamic State," he added.

On that score, he said, it had failed and faced the political distrust of non-Malays.

Abdullah said Parti Keadilan Nasional, now merged with Parti Rakyat, was a party of limited political consequence and even that was contingent on its ability to drum up enough drama to attract attention to itself, and cry enough tears to win sympathy votes.

The talk was attended by participants from more than 10 countries, including the United States, New Zealand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Australia and Singapore, as well as several Arabs and others from Asean nations. Abdullah also took questions from the floor.