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Nice, but there's steel, too

Abdullah Ahmad

NO one, I know, wants the Prime Minister to be a clone of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, nor does Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, by any stretch of the imagination, desire it. Being different is natural. Even siblings are not the same physically and psychologically and may go as far as to differ ideologically.

Prime ministers, perhaps more so than absolute kings and sheikhs, are lonely at the top. If he is genteel and genial, he may hold parties and dances as a form of relaxation.

If he is religious and modest, he invariably invokes God. Besides seeking divine assistance, if he is artful he will employ aides to tell him the truth without fear or favour.

Of course, since he is not infallible, he must be excused for having a political clique and court jesters.

Pak Lah is only 19 days into the job. So far, so good, as attested by Dr Mahathir. Very good, then. But there is a thirst, both here and abroad, to know more - not least in the sphere of the Malaysian economy.

My views on the business of forecasting have been heavily influenced by the joke that economists had predicted 10 out of the last five recessions.

Still, I have been intermittently obliged, out of patriotism if nothing else, to take the dismal science of economics a bit more seriously. As I write this, I am preparing to voyage to Hong Kong for a panel discussion with bankers and money managers on the subject "Malaysia under Badawi: Challenges, changes and prospects".

My short answers to the three are: many, as always; some, where needful; and good to excellent, period.

I don't say so merely out of patriotism, however. Although the concept of central planning has been progressively rubbished over the years, the country's economy remains one of the world's most closely managed.

Unlike George W. Bush in post-war Iraq, Malaysia has always had a plan. Some of the upside targets in the current Eighth Malaysia Plan have not been met due to a variety of externally-imposed causes.

Even so, the country's fundamentals remain sound. Planning takes a lot out of the guesswork of policy prediction and makes it easier to see what we have done right and where we've gone wrong. Much of the international buzz on Abdullah's succession has focused on what he will do about the latter.

It is a fair enough question. Part of the answer was provided by the rally in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange in the weeks leading up to Abdullah's appointment on Oct 31.

Foreign portfolio investors are once again betting on Malaysian firms and giving a salutary vote of confidence to the new leadership. Sentiment has improved with the perception that more economic decision-making is being left to technocrats and professionals.

Abdullah has pushed for the speedier completion of projects and his pledges on wiping out corruption and improving government efficiency have struck responsive chords, at home and abroad.

Like the equity investors, I think the electorate will wager on Abdullah as the sure bet to lead the Barisan Nasional to victory in the next general election and the country into the future.

Of course, it is still too early to put the Prime Minister's ambitions to the test. But Abdullah has been wise not to encourage excessive

expectations and rhetoric and to vouch only for what he can deliver. "We don't make promises but we work and deliver, and we continue to improve and make plans for the future," he said this week in Terengganu.

For now, that should satisfy middle Malaysians and their well-wishers in Hong Kong. At this juncture, Abdullah deserves the benefit of every doubt. Not so for the international Press, though, for whom present trends are mined for future headlines.

I was a little dismayed by Newsweek, which included a quote in its cover story on Nov 3 describing Abdullah unflatteringly as a "Malaysian Jimmy Carter". The Economist of Nov 1 ran the rather droll caption: "Nice chap, but any good?"

I forbear such irritations if only because freedom of speech implies the indulgence of letting people say things I don't like to hear. No one can seriously criticise Abdullah at the moment, so journalistic "balance" demands that a few pot shots be taken at his "Mr Nice Guy" image.

I have no doubt that it is a good image to take to the people and to repair the cleavages wrought by the politics of conviction. But in an interim in which the merest hints can be inflated into portents, it may be seen as a sign of weakness.

After Dr Mahathir's unflinching combativeness, even the flicker of a smile on the face of Malaysia's leadership may be construed as a slavish desire to please.

That would be a mistake, as I've often stressed. Pak Lah's background, stature and conciliatory mien have drawn the sting out of Pas and inspired Umno's troops to recapture the frontline State of Terengganu. Against his Islamic credentials, Pas' Dokumen Negara Islam becomes even more barefacedly an election ploy.

Even Pas leaders admit as much, after having been made painfully aware of how much it has frightened non-Muslims voters. The Pas strategy has always been the establishment of a hudud theocracy by stealth, through a sort of neo-Marxist belief in religious and historical inevitability.

Its bluff has now been called and conciliation may well provide the balm to heal the rift in the Malay body politic. Pak Lah's endearing qualities make him the best man for the job. But after he wins the people's mandate, which I am sure he will, both the opportunity and the necessity for toughness will arise. If he regains Terengganu, he will be at even greater liberty to flex some muscle.

A sense of firmness, as well as trust and affection, is sorely needed. Malaysia's biggest economic worry is its competitiveness in a globalised environment where rivals have come up to breathe down its neck.

It must transform itself from an economy that competes entirely on low labour costs to one that markets itself on value-added. This demands a new set of incentives and a political commitment to reform the system of economic rewards and penalties that has driven growth so far.

Abdullah has to remove the dependencies that are slowing both international competitiveness and progress on the NEP target of a 30 per cent Bumiputera stakehold in the economy.

His emphasis on corruption and government delivery is not, and must not be seen as, the soft option of a politician seeking popularity. Neither are his avowals of accountability and transparency. He will have to be tough on his Government if he wants his earnest sincerity to translate into results. Knowing Pak Lah, he will accomplish this in the nicest possible way.

What makes Pak Lah largely acceptable? Humility, candour, character? Insipid, clean, safe? Your answer is as good as mine.

My lasting impression of Abdullah is that he is ever cautious, imbued with moral fibre and exceptional at the political high-table. He still has

no house of his own, though he has been in the Government for a quarter of a century.

I pray that when he eventually leaves office, like the Muslim warrior Saladin, he will still have no property or land, and when he dies he will leave nothing but a sobbing nation that honours and adores him for placing national well-being above self.