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`Fight corruption, cut red tape' (HL)

Sarban Singh; Firdaus Abdullah; Shamini Darshni  
PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today he does not plan to make any new appointments nor reshuffle the Cabinet for the time being, but pledged to fight corruption and reduce red tape.

He also said he would announce his deputy only when he was ready.

After chairing his first Cabinet meeting as Prime Minister at Bangunan Perdana Putra here, Abdullah said he had informed Yang Di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin of this before his swearing-in as Prime Minister on Friday. Abdullah told a packed Press conference that he had also directed Ministers to set up a task force in their ministries to tighten procedures and reduce bureaucracy in efforts to fight corruption.

The Prime Minister entered the briefing hall on the first floor of the Prime Minister's Department about 1.40pm, four hours after the Cabinet meeting started.

Abdullah began the Press conference by apologising for being late as today's meeting was "unusually long". He said his introductory remarks at the Press conference were "long but we tell you everything, so it is easier".

He said: "I was at the palace. As usual, as Prime Minister, before chairing the morning's Cabinet meeting, I had to call on His Majesty.

"I took the opportunity at the first meeting I chaired as Prime Minister to explain some of the measures we would like to introduce and pursue and some projects that need to be introduced.

"At the same time I also told them (Cabinet Ministers) that I am not yet making any Cabinet appointments, neither am I going to make any reshuffle for the time being.

"Today, I informed the Cabinet that I had taken an unprecedented action to make my first official address in Parliament (on Monday). I felt it was important that they (parliamentarians) be the first people to hear what I would like to do, after having moved a motion of thanks to (Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"I said we should build on the success that was achieved during the period of his premiership of Malaysia. We must be able to build on and improve and do much more so we can achieve excellence. (Although) that was the theme of my speech, there were many (other) issues touched.

"I did say that those issues that were touched were very important and especially, although I did not use that word, it had to do with the improvement of the public service (and) the public service delivery system.

"At the same time, certain measures must be introduced in the Government and I had also informed them that I would like Ministers to form a small task force. This task force must look into ways and means of how to reduce bureaucracy and red tape in all departments under the ministry and the ministry itself so that the waiting period for approval of applications would not (take) too long.

"I did mention that this long waiting period due to many procedures that needed to be adhered to or followed and due to red tape, can breed corruption.

"People who are impatient and not prepared to wait too long think money may speed up action and may get results...

"So, waiting is not good, really. It tempts people to pay money and

tempts people to want to purposely make them (the procedures) long, so that finally they will be able to earn something else to work faster.

"I have also informed them that I would be paying a lot of attention to government frontline departments. By that I mean the departments dealing with the people (where) over-the-counter service is very important and needs to be improved.

"At the same time we want to make sure that the rakyat get quality service as fast as possible.

"And we have identified, to begin with, the district office. I think the district office is certainly a frontline office (as) it deals with the people. The district offices really have a lot of work to do compared to 30 years ago. (Back then) they did not have to work as much as today.

"Today, the district offices are burdened with so many responsibilities and the DOs are expected to play very important roles in the development of the districts. The land offices, particularly today, are much, much, more active than before. They are also a licence issuing authority for many licences and proposals required by developers.

"So, I have asked the Chief Secretary to the Government (Tan Sri Samsudin Osman) to chair a special task force to re-engineer district offices throughout the country, and at the same time to take similar action on local government authorities.

"The local government offices are also very, very, actively involved in many things that have to do with the development of areas within their jurisdiction and authority (as well as) in urban development all over the place and semi-urban areas within the local government areas.

"They (local governments) need a lot of help. The point that I am saying is that regulations, (and) yes, we have regulations, but let us not be too preoccupied with the importance of imposing regulations. What is equally important is that the Government, besides being a regulator, must also be the enabler. It must be taking further the role of wanting to support, wanting to do more.

"And these measures in some ways, I believe, will also contribute to raising the effectiveness of preventive measures in order to combat, prevent or reduce corruption.

"We hope we can achieve zero corruption, in other words, no corruption. We know it is going to be very difficult, but I think we must try to reduce the incidences of corruption as much as possible. That is what we must do.

"I have also proposed the setting up of the Malaysian Institute for Public Ethics, (which) will go together with another proposal I made for a National Integrity Plan. We are setting this up not just for the public sector, but also for the private sector.

"We want the private and the public sectors to come together, to meet together, and to understand the respective roles because the Malaysia Inc policy remains. Both sectors are equally important. They must be mutually supportive, mutually complementary and supplementary in terms of the efforts being made by both sectors to contribute to national development.

"And, of course, the objective is mainly to promote good governance, accountability, transparency, efficiency, providing training, providing courses and providing opportunities for discussions. We hope with these measures we can see some improvement in the attitudes and motivation they must have in order to provide quality service and improve public services' efficiency.

"That's what I was telling my colleagues I wanted to do in terms of specific projects and programmes.

"But, generally speaking, I did mention to them that it is important we in the administration continue with the hands-on approach in managing the

various programmes under our respective ministries. That is very important. We must know what is happening in our ministries and we must know exactly what to expect and anticipate and we must provide leadership by example.

"Leadership by example, to me, is important. I remember I was responsible for the initiation and the implementation of the leadership by example programme when I was first appointed Minister in Dr Mahathir's Cabinet.

"I still believe in such a programme and I think that this is something we have to do. If we talk about hard work, integrity and honesty, then we in the administration must be the first to show, to demonstrate that we are people of integrity, that we work hard, that we are dedicated, that we know the stuff and are ready to provide the leadership.

"In Penang, I asked the people to work with me, not to work for me. To work with me, so that together we can help to achieve more for the nation, to do more for our people. I want all the Ministers to adopt the same approach.

"Nobody should be made to work for us. They will be working with us.

"Talking about honesty and integrity, we should not be displaying too much wealth and showing how much we have. The important thing is that the attitude must be right.

"I told them (Cabinet Ministers) this morning that what I said today was not everything I wanted them to do. There are lots of things we can do together, but we must continue to work hard. As much as I want the rakyat to work with me, more importantly, I want my colleagues in the administration to work with me.

"Of course, I play the role of the leader, but all of us are working towards the same objective.

"(During the Cabinet meeting the Ministers) were eager to discuss and hear some good ideas and all their opinions and views were recorded. And on the whole, there was enthusiasm and I am very happy with that.

"Everyone was happy and wanted to see all that I had suggested come to pass. This is important," the Prime Minister said. Pak Lah then took questions from the large number of local and foreign journalists.

However, Abdullah was non-committal when asked whether he would name his deputy or make changes to the Cabinet before or after the general election.

Asked whether he has decided on who his deputy would be, Abdullah said: "When I make the announcement, that means I've decided. Be patient."

Abdullah advised all quarters not to speculate on who his deputy would be.

He said his deputy had to be one who could assist him ably and provide good leadership.

"I will have a lot of work now since I am also chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation of the Islamic Conference."

Abdullah said as a leader of a country, he would also have to manage foreign relations, a task that has been assumed by leaders of many countries in recent years.

Asked whether it would not be too much work since he had assumed the Finance and Home portfolios, Abdullah said he had deputies to help out.

"I have a Second Minister, two deputies and a Parliamentary Secretary at the Finance Ministry and two deputies and a Parliamentary Secretary at the Home Ministry... maybe there are people who can be made to work harder."

Present at the Press conference were Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman.

Asked about Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's remarks that he did not foresee any difficulty working with him, Abdullah said he

had no problems working with anyone who is friendly.

Asked whether there was any likelihood of Malaysians going to the polls this year, he said at the moment, he too was uncertain.

"Are we likely to see? If it happens, you will be able to see. At the moment, I am not certain yet whether we should have it this year, but anyway, we never know."

Asked to comment on DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock's remarks in Parliament that he would work with the Prime Minister, Pak Lah said:

"There is no problem. No problem. I am sure there are areas where we can work together and this applies to all other Opposition parties. There are certain things (sensitive issues) which we cannot politicise to the extent that it affects the good relations among our people.

"We must have an understanding not to raise them. Of course, we have not been raising them as we have the anti-sedition law but, at the same time, we must continue to be reminded of many things. For example, the issues of foreign policy when we had all people, including the Opposition parties, supporting the Government's decision on Palestine, on Iraq - that is a good example - and that is working together (and being) mutually supportive and that is very good.

"It means we are not going to quarrel over everything, for every policy or every issue. There are certain things that we must stand together (for) the sake of the nation.

Asked to elaborate on his statements about fighting corruption, and when pointed out that statistics show that the Home Ministry had the most number of corruption cases, the Prime Minister said:

"Yes, that is right. We have been fighting very hard. If we had not done anything, then the figure might be even higher. There are a lot of things we have to do. I admit (to) that. I will not hide facts.

"I will not sweep things under the carpet. If that is the situation, then that is the situation. Let us accept it. But let us work harder to reduce it. I believe if we had not been working this hard, the percentage may be higher than what you are seeing today."