

15/11/2003

`Abdullah-Najib team unbeatable'

IPOH, Fri. - Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad picked Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his deputy rather than Datuk Seri Najib Razak because he is the best man to lead Umno against Pas.

New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, saying this today, added that only Abdullah had the political pedigree and personality to counter and contend with Pas' brand of extremist religion.

"If he cannot, then nobody can. If he fails, then God help Malaysia," he said in his speech "Malaysia - Post Dr Mahathir" at a dinner talk hosted by the Perak Academy here.

Abdullah said the 1999 general election clearly showed that Umno can pose a bigger danger to itself than Pas ever can.

"Pahang can be lost if Najib is not made Deputy Prime Minister. Delay in naming the DPM can lead to unhealthy speculation by irresponsible people, not to mention plots and intrigues."

Abdullah stressed that he did not wish to decide for the Prime Minister but said Najib would complement him at the head of Umno and Government.

"Najib is modern, broad-minded, comfortable in the international arena and an experienced political thoroughbred.

"The duo would make an unbeatable combination."

Abdullah said those in the know understand the Prime Minister to be meticulous in this as in everything else and will need some time of his own to make a choice after an appropriate period of what is perceived as consultation.

"Of course, at the end of the day, the choice is solely his prerogative."

Abdullah also disagreed with the common perception that the Prime Minister's "Mr Nice Guy" image would work to his disadvantage.

He said that his conciliatory exterior concealed sterner stuff.

"But the image of a consensus-builder is important for Abdullah's short and long-term tasks, which are to galvanise the Malays.

"He may yet attain a most remarkable feat, enticing those estranged Malays to return to Umno - solidify racial harmony, maintain economic justice, growth and prosperity and elevate education as the principal engine of national well-being."

Abdullah said Malaysia was still in an interim and it would be a while with many things having to fall into place before the nation can define itself as post-Dr Mahathir.

He said over the 16 months of extended transition, it has been tempting to believe that Dr Mahathir had established enough stability and continuity to make reasonably sure that not much would change.

"But, of course, there will be change. Malaysia needs to run faster to stay on its winning streak."

Abdullah said Dr Mahathir, will, indeed, be a very hard act to follow and his awesome political and administrative powers will not be broken for a long time, if at all.

He does not think that Abdullah "will be in a hurry" to make his mark so as not to invite invidious comparisons with his mentor.

"It would be too fanciful at this time to estimate how Abdullah will fare against these international precedents.

"My honest opinion is that he will emerge, if at all, only after he has won his mandate in the next general election, which I expect will be held

in the spring or summer of next year."

Abdullah said that it is almost certain that the Prime Minister will improve on the 1999 general election result which went unusually badly for the Barisan Nasional.

He expressed confidence that Abdullah would do well, adding that he must surround himself with talented and experienced people and blend a careful mix of old hands and new blood.

"He has done well as Number Two and if he keeps the party united, he will defeat Pas' boast of winning Kedah, Pahang, Selangor and the Federal Territory."

Abdullah does not think Pas will capture the centre, but said that any mishandling of policies affecting the Malays and Islam will increase its support.

"Pas thrives on discontent under the camouflage of religion. It has too little to stand on its own merits. Even so, Pas must never be underestimated and Abdullah's biggest challenge will be in preventing and banishing an Asean version of Saudi Arabia or Iran."

On Pas' Islamic State document, Abdullah said non-Muslims do not know or comprehend the pressures the Malays are under.

"Many people would never have thought and are pretty shocked that the level of acceptance of the party among Malays could have reached the present benchmark."

Abdullah warned that Pas' appeal is not diminishing and the party is building wellsprings to nurture a culture ostensibly from outside Malaysia.

"If you don't take Pas seriously and battle it earnestly and craftily, do not say you have not been forewarned.

"If the non-Muslims do not or refuse to see these dangers, if they can't sense what it is like to be an enlightened, liberal and forward-looking Malay nowadays, then I say Pas will manifest its brand of Islamic radicalism sooner than you realise it."

About 350 people comprising the elite of Ipoh, led by the Raja Muda of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, who is the patron of Perak Academy, attended the talk. Others present were chairman of Perak Academy Board of Governors Datuk Dr Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan and Deputy State Secretary Datuk Ahmad Konchong.