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Issues seen forming the Prime Minister's greatest challenges

Jawhar Hassan

BUILDING healthy and viable nations involves many things. One of the most important is nourishing the right values, entrenching the right practices and establishing the right institutions.

Last Monday the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi initiated a practice that hopefully becomes a haloed one in our development. In moving a motion to thank the former Prime Minister in Parliament, the greatest leader this country has had, he also announced, in a comprehensive manner, how he viewed his responsibilities and obligations as a Prime Minister, and what his primary principles and goals are.

That he chose Parliament, the supreme legislative body to which he is also responsible, to make this important statement is significant. He could have easily chosen another lesser forum, and avoided committing himself to any difficult goals to which he will be held accountable.

Instead he chose the Parliament, and in so doing he demonstrated the central importance that he as Prime Minister attached to the institution. More importantly, he subjected himself to its harsh scrutiny, for his inaugural speech will no doubt be recalled in the months and years to come, especially when the opposition wants to remind him of his alleged omissions and shortfalls.

Abdullah also did another novel thing. A man of God, he submitted himself not only to the scrutiny of the House and the people, but "above all, by the Almighty".

He could have chosen no higher and more exacting authority to judge him.

He pledged to manage and build upon the successes of his predecessor, and with the help of everyone, build a future that was "lebih cemerlang, lebih gemilang, lebih terbilang".

The task the new Prime Minister has set himself is a gigantic one. It touches on virtually every sphere of national life - politics, national security, education, economic development, social justice, public administration and social development.

Three clusters of issues will constitute his greatest challenge. First, the task of transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-driven competitive economy, with its associated requisites of quality education, capacity for innovation and creativity, research and development, and new sources of growth.

Future competitiveness and sustainable growth, and consequently distributive capacity, will depend very much on Malaysia's performance in these areas.

Our record in recent years has been dismal in areas such as developing innovative capacity and R&D - areas critical to growth.

The second cluster relates to the ethnic income, knowledge and digital divides. It requires urgent attention, because the situation has been deteriorating for some fifteen years now. Just in the last three years the Bumiputera-Chinese income divide grew from 1:1.74 to 1:1.80.

Further deterioration will increase the potential for serious social, economic and political repercussions that multi-racial Malaysia can ill afford.

Abdullah will have to wrestle with the same dilemmas that plagued his predecessor: how to close the gap and promote social justice, yet ease out preferential treatment and phase in meritocracy.

Certainly, more emphasis will have to be laid upon meritocracy within Bumiputera ranks, and closing the divides within ethnic groups as well. For too long we have allowed our focus upon disparities between ethnic groups to distract us from also dealing with the growing gaps within ethnic groups.

The third cluster of challenges is that associated with corruption. Though corruption levels are still not as bad as among some neighbouring countries, they are bad enough - and getting worse. Malaysia is ranked among the top bribe-paying countries.

In some ways this might be the most difficult challenge for Abdullah, one where he might be most politically vulnerable. To effectively combat corruption the Government will need to foster a change in values, strengthen laws, streamline administrative rules and procedures, and reform institutions. Most importantly, the system must be empowered and equipped to act without fear and favour, including against the powerful and the rich.

It is a measure of this Prime Minister's courage and integrity that he has chosen to stake his success and reputation upon his ability to handle these difficult challenges. Obviously, he cannot fight these battles alone. He will need the support of people of ability and integrity everywhere - in the Cabinet, in the party, in the front, among the NGOs, and most of all among the people.

Under Dr Mahathir, Malaysia climbed steadily up the ladder of human development. We now lie third in the UNDP's category of Medium Human Development countries. Hopefully, under the consultative stewardship of Abdullah, Malaysia will break through the barrier and establish itself firmly as a High Human Development country.