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'Abdullah will strengthen growth'

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DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected to consolidate the social and

economic growth achieved during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's administration, economist Michael Backman said yesterday.

Backman said that Abdullah, with his traditional Malay approach, would have a better chance of uniting the community.

"A greater share of the economy would be devoted to the services industry, such as accounting, legal, education, healthcare and others," he

told journalists after his talk on "Malaysia: Governance and Economy in the Mahathir era and in the post-Mahathir era" in Kuala Lumpur.

Backman, a self-confessed fan of Dr Mahathir, said it is natural for people to feel apprehensive about a new leader.

"Definitely, there will be a change in style, but change in style is not a step backwards.

"There has been so much growth (during Dr Mahathir's era), and a consolidation (during Abdullah's administration) would be good," he said.

Backman, who wrote several books on Asian governments and economy, likened Abdullah's situation to when Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong took over from (Senior Minister) Lee Kuan Yew.

Singaporeans, who had perceived the low-profile Goh as being too cautious, worried over the change in leadership but now see him as a strong and calming force in the republic.

"After the can-do razzle-dazzle of a Lee or Mahathir, the benefits of a calming, uniting leader should not be undervalued," he said.

Backman, who is Australian, said that Abdullah is an astute politician who has gone through the very tough and intricate sieving process of the political party.

He foresees business people to have less influence on government decisions under Abdullah's administration, while civil servants will play a greater role in the decision-making process.

During his talk, Backman said Dr Mahathir's great trust of businessmen has had a huge beneficial impact on the Malaysian economy.

He said the "redistribute" policies of Dr Mahathir have been justified no matter how economically inefficient and wasteful they have been sometimes.

"The practice of selecting individual entrepreneurs has at least broken, once and for all, the link between substantial wealth and ethnicity.

"Sometimes, short-term economic efficiency must be sacrificed for longer-term prosperity," he said.