

28/11/2003

PM has made critical decisions in his first month

Hardev Kaur

"A feel good Hari Raya". That is the wish of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi during this festive season. The "feel good" environment is demonstrated and enhanced by the political stability, economic progress, and racial and religious harmony in the country.

"We are peaceful not because of the prosperity we have but because our people of many races and religions know how to live in harmony and tolerance with one another," the Prime Minister said.

The peace and harmony of the various races and religions was clearly demonstrated during the Hari Raya celebrations and the unique Malaysian practice of holding open house. The rakyat and visitors are given Malaysian hospitality, made to feel at home and feted to local delicacies.

Malaysians enjoy peace, security and racial and religious harmony. But it is not to be taken for granted and must be treasured, nurtured and jealously safe-guarded.

The heightened security alerts by developed countries, the conflict and turmoil in the Middle East, the terrorist attacks in Iraq, Istanbul, Morocco and Indonesia are reminders of the turmoil and fragile situation around the world.

It has been four weeks since Abdullah took over the reigns of the Government from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad but he wasted no time in making some critical decisions on the home front.

He has shown that he's decisive, wants results, wants promises kept and wants to hear the truth. He took care of the immediate needs of farmers and fishermen - distributing seedlings, fish fry and fertilisers - hard hit by the recent floods in Kedah and Penang.

He has called for improvements in services of front-line government departments and instructed prompt payment to contractors handling government-funded projects. The payments due for government funded projects as of Oct 31, 2003, were settled earlier this week - just 10 days after Abdullah first issued the directive.

The payment of RM3.6 billion to contractors added to the Hari Raya cheer and the year-end festivities. The spin-offs from this will be tremendous and the multiplier effect will add to the good cheer and to economic activities which in turn will be reflected in a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figure.

Investor confidence, both domestic and foreign, will be improved. It sends a powerful message that the Government is determined to make the delivery system efficient and smooth. Now it is for the other agencies, State Governments and departments to follow.

Abdullah called for co-operation among government agencies and said that there "should be no finger pointing". All parties need to work together closely and co-or-dinate efforts. Although each government department has a special area of responsibility, more often than not it has to act together and join forces with other departments in matters of overlapping authority and common concerns.

The Prime Minister went down to the "factory floor" to meet with people and assess the situation first-hand. He made surprise visits to the Immigration Department and the traffic police headquarters and urged the rakyat "to work with me and not for me".

Admitting that "the responsibility is heavy and I cannot do it alone", he called on ministries to cut down on bureaucratic red tape, improve

efficiency and stamp out corruption.

Proposals for the revamp of frontline agencies are to be submitted to the Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman. Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers are to establish a task force to reduce bureaucracy in their States.

District offices and local government authorities are not spared. They too have their work cut out to improve efficiency and delivery of services to the people.

Samsudin has been directed to chair a body that would reassess the role of the land office, district office and local councils to improve services rendered to the public.

"The directive is based on the Government's aspirations to raise the quality of the civil administration to one that is more efficient and smooth.

"The next step in the fight against corruption is to form and implement a National Integrity Plan. Under the plan, a Malaysian Institute for Public Ethics will be established," a statement from the Prime Minister's office said.

Even as the Government does its part, Malaysians must share the responsibility. They need to rid themselves of the "Third World mentality" the malaise confronting Malaysians as manifested in poor execution, inept management, shoddy maintenance, corrupt tendencies, appalling customer service and lack of civic consciousness.

"We are one in our struggle, and our struggle is for the country and the people. When we are able to reach consensus and co-operate, we can face the challenges," the Prime Minister said.

The challenges include those of managing success at home and coping with the changing external environment. Conscious of the importance that the fruits of national development are enjoyed by all, the Prime Minister stressed the need for caring and sharing with the less fortunate.

Distribution of wealth and the restructuring of society will have to be continued in the face of increased trade liberalisation and globalisation, as Bumiputera industries, according to Abdullah, are still fundamentally weak and remain vulnerable to external economic threats.

In his first month, the Prime Minister has focused on the domestic front, and rightly so. But foreign affairs will not be neglected and will be accorded due attention.

It is an area that Abdullah understands well having served as Foreign Minister for eight years. And many countries look to Malaysia as an example to emulate and as their spokesman in international forums. Abdullah's understanding of foreign affairs and his friendship with many foreign leaders will be useful in leading the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). The chairmanship of the two organisations comes at a time when the Islamic world is badly misjudged, misunderstood, maligned and under close scrutiny.

Malaysia's progressive and moderate approach and Abdullah's Islamic credentials make him a key player in fostering a better understanding of Muslims and Islam at home and around the world.