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Where hopes reside, wishes can come true

SEND me a wish list, said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, when he met a group of young Malaysians in Putrajaya last month. Soon after, the youth section of this newspaper invited everyone to hand in their list. And they haven't stopped coming in.

With each wish, from Malaysians young and old, there is the underlying assumption, an unwavering belief, that the new Prime Minister who begins his tenure today, will lead us into a better future, which reflects the aspirations of all Malaysians within the nation's unique context.

For there is much to look forward to. The Malaysian economy is in good shape. Despite the strident calls for a business and tourism boycott by an influential Jewish group and the recent US Senate decision to restrict military training aid to Malaysia, God willing, we should be able to weather the storm of criticisms levelled at us for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's apparently anti-Semitic statements.

Abdullah has the unenviable job of managing a country that is already considered - even by our detractors - as the darling of the developing world. Certainly, we must continue to be the Voice of the South, especially in our dealings with the powerful West. If Malaysia stops pointing out the inconsistencies of First World governments, will there be other countries willing to take on this unpopular task?

Managing success is not easy, but with the foundation set firmly in place Abdullah will undoubtedly make the right decisions for the country.

First on the wish list of many is Bangsa Malaysia, which must begin with more integrated schools. There are great hopes that he will define this further, concretise the path upon which we can all move - in the same direction - towards a Malaysian identity. Although there is much that brings us together, even Abdullah himself has noted that he only catches glimpses of this identity when Malaysians go abroad. At home, most of us are still lodged in our respective compartments, not helped by an extremist Islamic Opposition which wants to isolate Malaysians from each other.

The second wish would be to see him tackle corruption. Abdullah must bring together the sharpest minds to conduct a critical enquiry into the sources and causes of such deceitful practices and foster more efficient and transparent government. Here, action will speak louder than words.

There may be structural and systemic defects which allow corruption to fester and these must be fixed and dealt with thoroughly. We cannot afford to gloss over such critical matters, even if higher or bigger goals are at stake. As homeowners should know, a handful of termites can create enough havoc to bring down entire buildings.

Third on the wish list is education. Abdullah has declared himself a firm believer of the Vision School concept. Now, with the help of Barisan Nasional leaders, he can make this a reality in every town, district and State.

Malaysians must know that peace cannot be sustained, at least not in the long run, if we remain cloistered in our respective comfort zones.

Through an improved national education system with an emphasis on English, our young can learn to acknowledge and respect difference. Let's not fudge the issue: our survival depends on our ability to live alongside each other and Abdullah must find the resources to ensure that this is understood by every child in this country.

The last wish to be plucked from the hundreds received is the hope that he will allow us a moment for self-scrutiny. We have gone so far, done so much. Let's sit down together to ponder the forked paths ahead of us. After decades of fast-paced development, a short pause for introspection will help. After that, we can all carry on with the tasks entrusted to us.

As for Abdullah, the wish list may never end. But if he gathers the best minds and most experienced people around him (no substitute for experience) and employs the right strategies, he should be able to achieve a great deal during his first term as Prime Minister. We want him to excel.

Let's help him do it.