

**What's next for Pak Lah?**  
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**Ong Kian Ming**

With the attention last week firmly focused on the formation of the opposition led state governments, especially in Perak, much less attention has been paid to the more important issue of how the Barisan Nasional (BN), especially Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will react to the message sent by the voters in the historic elections two weeks ago. MCPX

abdullah ahmad badawi election announcement 130208 confidentOne has to remember that Pak Lah, weakened as he is, is still the prime minister and the BN still controls a majority of seats in the parliament. This means he still has the power to form the cabinet and to pass legislation and spearhead policies moving ahead.

What is not clear is the direction Pak Lah will take moving forward and none of his post election comments have given us a firm idea of his future trajectory.

I want to propose five possible options which Pak Lah can take, which I've entitled the 5 'R's. He can Resign, he can be Replaced by someone else, he can take a turn towards greater Repression, he can Remain with the status quo and finally, he can try to implement some of the Reforms he promised in the run up to the 2004 elections.

While past history indicates Pak Lah in all likelihood will take the Remain option, I hope that he will take the recent polls as a concrete sign that the Reform option is the road which voters want him take.

### **Attacked from within**

In the face of the historic losses experienced by the BN (which I've discussed elsewhere), there is no indication that Pak Lah will resign from his position as prime minister as well as president of Umno even though there have been calls within Umno, notably by Mukhriz Mahathir, that he should resign.

At the same time, PAS leaders have also contributed to the calls for Pak Lah to resign. Even though the speculation that he would be pressured to step down will remain as will the branding of Pak Lah as a 'lame duck' PM, it seems that Resignation is still not on the table and not one option that he is publicly contemplating.

The other possible option, though not one that will be of his own choosing, is that he may be attacked from within Umno and be forced out of his position as president of Umno. It has been speculated that an alliance featuring Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Mukhriz and Tengku Razaleigh (Ku Li) is already in place and trying to garner momentum to depose Pak Lah.

It is likely that such sentiments cannot be quelled and will continue right up to the Umno general assembly which will take place later this year. But in the meantime, it is likely that the Replacement option will not occur in the next few months.

Pak Lah may also decide that he may have been too permissive in allowing the opposition a free hand to campaign, bloggers to voice dissent and civil society to take to the streets. He may decide to turn to the Repression option which is to institute a harsh crackdown on any

hint of public dissent within the BN, among opposition leaders and among society at large. He may decide to increase the use of the ISA, institute a crackdown on the media and increase his grip on government institutions such as the Election Commission.

He may also decide to divert federal funding from the opposition controlled states away from the state governments and towards BN or Umno controlled channels much like what the BN did in Terengganu after PAS took control of the state in 1999.

Of course, states like Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor do not have petroleum royalty accounts which can be diverted although government projects may be suspended or used as a carrot and stick to prevent corporations from working closely with the governments of the opposition controlled states.

But this option also seems unlikely given that Pak Lah has not shown the willpower or determination (a good thing, in my opinion) to institute a harsh crackdown of this nature. Indeed, early indications are that the press, bloggers and members of civil society seemed to be emboldened by the election results and are speaking out more than before, without having the threat of a government backlash, at least for now.

### **Maintain status quo**

If history is any indication, the path Pak Lah will most likely take is the maintenance of the status quo position which is to Remain in the position he is in now. There has been no indication from Pak Lah that he will do a drastic 180 degree shift in his policy decisions or implementation.

The new cabinet, will be a reflection of the fact that many BN leaders lost their seats rather than a fundamental shift in the way in which the BN will operate. With Pak Lah's focus on trying to stem the growing dissent within Umno, it is not likely that he will be able to shift his focus towards more substantive policy changes.

But there is a final option on the table which Pak Lah could possibly take. It will take a great degree of willpower, courage and determination on his part. It will involve fighting against entrenched interests, many of which are found within the BN. This option is to carry out his Reform promises which gave so many people hope and caused so many to vote for the BN in 2004.

He can use this historic opportunity to fundamentally alter the political landscape in Malaysia. He can move on the legislative front to abolish the ISA so that the threat of political repression is removed, revamp the UUCA so that students are allowed once again to take part in political activities, to revoke the PPPA so that the media can be freed up, to give teeth to the ACA so that it can fully live up to its mandate and to make the EC a truly independent institution.

To those who say that this is not possible, I point to the example of Lee Teng Hui, the former president of Taiwan and leader of the KMT, which was, for a long time, the dominant party in Taiwanese politics. In the 1990s, Lee moved against dissenters within his own party and used the threat of the then opposition, the DPP, to institutionalise far reaching institutional changes that lead to a more open and democratic Taiwan.

If Pak Lah realises that his time as prime minister is up whether or not he chooses the status quo option, why not use this opportunity instead to try to implement long lasting

institutional changes? At least this way, his legacy will be one of a Reformist prime minister, albeit belatedly, rather than one who was pushed out because of his failure to keep his promises. It is not too late to go down the Reform path, Pak Lah, one that the voters were hoping you would take way back in 2004.

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