

Students give Pak Lah tough time
Malaysiakini.com
Aug 2, 2008
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Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was put on the defensive when he was asked a wide range of thorny questions by students during a forum today.
MCPX

Students queried the prime minister after he had delivered his keynote address at the Malaysian Student Leaders Summit at a hotel in Kuala Lumpur, with questions including:

- In achieving 2020, are we on schedule?
- I wish to join the civil service, but the civil service doesn't seem to be colour blind. What will be done to redeem the image of the civil service?
- Will there be more public debates between the cabinet members and the opposition on government policies?
- What is the role of the government in holistic development?
- You have called yourself colour blind, but what is your view on our quota system? It is still more racial rather than community- based. Secondly, what is your views on protecting minorities rather than majorities?
- I want to know how do you feel about promises that you have not kept. I don't want to know what you're going to do, but I want to know how you feel, towards us, the people you are responsible for.

Vision 2020

Many of the questions were met with loud applause from the floor and often drew smiles from Abdullah along with Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein who was seated next to him.

student leaders summit 020808 abdullahOn Vision 2020 - a plan for Malaysia to achieve developed nation status - Abdullah said that Malaysia would meet the target provided that an annual growth rate of six percent is achieved.

"(But) we have problems now, due to increase in the price of oil and inflation," said Abdullah, adding that the government has allocated large amounts of money to meet the target.

"We are determined to fight and we must not give up", he added.

One student urged Abdullah to take action against "irresponsible politicians" for making irresponsible comments, to which the prime minister replied that he would "correct" such errant politicians.

He said that he would continue to remind politicians to exercise restraint and moderation.

Unkept promises

On the civil service, Abdullah said that the government was progressively making changes to make the civil service reflective of the composition of society.

He agreed that there was not enough non-Malays in certain sectors of the civil service but the government had created other mechanisms to allow non-Malay participation.

"For example, we have the Anti-Inflation Council. We make sure that the members come from the private sector and also members who are non-Malays," said Abdullah, adding that the government wants the council to be multi-racial.

He said that more of such institutions would be established to ensure that government policies are not being designed by one racial group.

student leaders summit 020808 participants
On unkept promises, Abdullah said that the Barisan Nasional 2004 election manifesto was not designed with a five-year time frame, but a plan towards Vision 2020.

"It doesn't matter whether I will be around or not," he said, adding that the government has already established a plan to implement the election promises.

He cites reforming the Anti-Corruption Agency and the judiciary as among examples of promises which are in the midst of being fulfilled.

Abdullah said that it takes time to change the attitude of the people in order for the government to fulfil its agenda to encouraging transparency, accountability and openness.

"I'm not saying this as an excuse ... social changes do take time as opposed to physical and structural changes," he added.

Speech topic

However, Abdullah's response to the question of the government's role in holistic development drew the loudest reaction from the floor.

The student said the topic was something which Abdullah did not address in his speech, drawing loud applause from the floor.

Following this, Abdullah sought a clarification from the student who posed the question, apparently oblivious that the topic for his keynote address listed in the event's itinerary was Holistic Development and the role of the Government.

"Holistic apa?... Where did I say so in my speech? Are you looking at it? Oh, you are (referring) to the title of my speech!" exclaimed Abdullah, leading to laughter, applause and then loud murmurs from the 500-odd participants.

He did not touch on the intended topic during his keynote address but instead delivered a 40-minute off-the-cuff address to the students on a wide range of topics.

The prime minister cut short the session and did not attend the scheduled press conference after the event as he has to catch a 5pm flight to Sarawak.

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