

Abdullah may yet have the last laugh
Malaysiakini.com
Oct 10, 2008
Khoo Kay Peng

The administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may not have much to show off. No big legacy, except for some potentially huge white elephants if the regional corridors economic development are allowed to go on.

Ironically, the out-going premier may yet have the last laugh as an accidental agent of change.

Abdullah's leadership was perceived as weak for his unwillingness to deploy heavy-handed tactics on political opponents.

The use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) on Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) leaders and several socio-political activists such as blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin was not done at his sole instruction. When he was probed on its use, Abdullah had appeared blur and unsure.

Yet, he was helpless to stop any unscrupulous and undemocratic actions from further deteriorating his support. Abdullah, who wants to be a leader for all Malaysians, fell prey to his own party culture.

The long spell of Mahathirism has made Umno untenable for moderate leaders such as Abdullah. A leader who can tame the party must be someone who is willing to fulfill the desire of its leadership to strengthen Malay supremacy and meet the personal interests of warlords whose cooperation he needs to control the party.

Abdullah squandered his strong electoral mandate in 2004 trying to fulfil these desires when he was forced to consolidate his power base in Umno. On this note, (former premier) Dr Mahathir Mohamad had cleverly turned the tables when Abdullah was trying to deconstruct some of Mahathir's legacies including the 'crooked' bridge to Singapore.

Abdullah could have stayed his course and continued to implement his reform pledges. The outcome would have been different. His leadership would have been more enduring and his legacy more profound. Yet, Mahathir was his Watergate.

The only comforting news for Abdullah is that Mahathir did not come out smelling like roses for his role in bringing down his successor. In fact, the feisty ex-premier's actions, at times dramatic and overboard, have made him less revered and respected. Mahathir should learn from the idiom 'you reap what you sow'.

bersih istana negara memo 150208 During Abdullah's tenure, the civil society movement has flourished. Malaysians have been forced out of their comfort zone to take an active part in politics. Opposition parties can now pick from a larger pool of talent.

The activists were not inspired by Abdullah's leadership but were cautious of what the country may turn out to be if destructive forces are given a free hand to govern like before. Hence, Barisan Nasional (BN) was stripped off its two-thirds parliamentary majority and leadership in five states in the Match 8 general election.

Najib Abdul Razak is taking over the helm at turbulent times. Since March, the movement for change has gained momentum. Dissenting voices have grown louder amidst unpopular and undemocratic decisions made by the government, chiefly the use of the ISA against a reporter, a member of parliament and a blogger-cum-social activist.

Calculated move?

In announcing his exit from next March, Abdullah promised to carry out his reform initiatives such as the Judicial Appointments Commission and Special Complaint Commission, and to strengthen the Anti-Corruption Agency.

This will not be popular with his party leaders. Najib will be put under tremendous pressure to complete these reforms since it is obvious that Abdullah will not be able to do so given the time constraints.

Najib will face growing public pressure to abolish the ISA and allow detainees the right to legal representation. He will also have to reform key public institutions such as the police force and the judiciary in order to restore public confidence in his administration.

pak lah and bn leaders meeting on ahmad ismail racial slur umno bukit bendera penang 090908 05From next March, other BN leaders will surely expect him to revamp the coalition's partnership formula. Najib is inheriting a weak and wounded coalition. Most component parties which lost badly in the general election are dependent on non-Malay support.

Previously, Abdullah was accused of not protecting the Malay interest. Can Najib now restore BN to its past glory as a multiracial political platform without antagonising his own party members who want a strong Umno? BN partners are expected to be more vocal and assertive in their dealings with Umno.

Abdullah's announcement has been timely, and he will leave before more damage is done to his short and thin legacy.

The US financial crisis is becoming contagious. Many economies including that of Malaysia may not be able to decouple fast enough to lower their dependence on the American market.

Almost 50 percent of Malaysia's electrical, electronic and industrial exports are intended for the US and Europe. Exports will start to slow down by year's end. Consumer demand will not recover until at least end of next year.

china economy 200404Competition for foreign direct investment will even get tougher as more investors adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Asia's good run may be disrupted if big economies such as China and Japan are affected by the US financial contagion.

As such, Abdullah's exit may not be a forced one but could well be a calculated move to avoid the crunch. The buck has now been passed to Najib. He is not only inheriting the crown but the risks, responsibilities and blame which come with it.

The impatience of Najib's supporters to see him quickly taking over the leadership may prove to be their biggest folly. A mid-2010 succession plan would have been better for Najib.

By that time, the world economy would have been more predictable and the US economy would be on the mend. He would also have been more prepared to take over the helm.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/91016>