

# What to expect from Abdullah

AFTER an incessant barrage of attacks over the last six months from former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Umno, the country's dominant political party, meets for three days from today to discuss and debate the plight of the Malays and the country.

Every year, the Umno assembly is the most watched political gathering in the country.

But this year, the eyes will also be on party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi — the main target of Dr Mahathir's scorn.

The delegates' main focus as the assembly begins will be on the presidential address. The question foremost on their minds is, will Abdullah — who has tactfully refused to be drawn into a public airing of dirty linen against his predecessor — respond in the same hard-hitting fashion as Dr Mahathir did during his 22 years as Umno president.

But given Abdullah's nature, those who expect him to come but with guns blazing are likely to be disappointed. It is just not his nature.

Yet, at the same time, in the last three days, he has already indicated that he will not sit back, and allow a screaming detractor to dictate the agenda for the country and for Umno to go forward.

"I am not a one-term Prime Minister," he said in the traditional interview with *Mingguan*

*Malaysia*.

"It's hard being nice. I can be nasty if you want," was his message to delegates when he met them at the pre-assembly meeting on Monday.

And going by his usual reaction to each new attack from Dr Mahathir since June, Abdullah's presidential address will focus on the larger agenda—that of taking the country into the next stage in the face of increasing competition and global uncertainties.

Yet, he cannot allow the one major platform he has every year with Umno members—the general assembly — to pass without addressing the Dr Mahathir issue. Because, his response is not only awaited by Umno delegates; the country and the international audience are also keen to hear him.

In some ways, it will be an examination of the last three years of his leadership, a state of the nation address that will look at what has been achieved, and what his programmes intend to achieve.

The economic statistics look good and the stock market is rising; yet some have a sense of disquiet that it is sluggish and that there are not enough mega projects — one of the hallmarks of Dr Mahathir's leadership.

There is greater openness in the country—greater Press freedom, greater debate and criticism in Parliament, not only from the Opposition but also from Barisan Na-

sional backbenchers and the public.

However, the race debate sometimes goes overboard, and religious intolerance seems to be creeping up.

Some think this is a sign Abdullah is not in full control.

The explanations have been given — by Abdullah, by his deputy Datuk Sri Najib Razak, and by most members of the Cabinet, Menteris Besar and Umno and BN leaders.

That Malaysia cannot depend on the model it has used over the last two decades to boost the economy by pump priming, through manufacturing, through commodities.

That Malaysians should use the openness they have to be constructive, and not abuse it.

That programmes such as the Ninth Malaysia Plan and capacity building are aimed at creating long-term foundations for sustained economic growth; and that good values need to be infused and made a way of life because it is these values which will eradicate corruption, enhance productivity and make Malaysia a nation of people with integrity; and that religious and race extremists will not be tolerated.

But still, people want to hear it all in one go, the big picture, from the man the country overwhelmingly voted for at the 2004 general election.

Therefore, Abdullah's presidential address is likely to focus on these issues, on the philosophy of his administration, the promises he made when he took office, and the promises that have yet to be delivered.

He will also focus on the guiding principles that will take the country forward, and the new industries and economic agendas Malaysia has to pursue and excel at to stay ahead, and certainly, unity.

Given his disposition, he is not going to be kind or tolerant of the racial and religious extremists who are getting more brazen — whatever their religion, whatever their race.

It is very unlikely that he will respond to Dr Mahathir by name.

Yet, he has already said that his patience has limits. Therefore, it is more than likely that he will again reply to all the allegations and accusations his predecessor has made against him, his policies and his administration.

And this time, given his comments to the *Mingguan Malaysia* and the delegates, Abdullah is not likely to be as subtle as he has been in the last six months.

And after the presidential address, the assembly is likely to focus on the more pressing and larger issues facing the Malays and the country — and party unity — rather than devote time to detractors of the administration.