

Softly, softly, Pak Lah does it his way

KUALA LUMPUR: "If we can achieve what we want by whispering softly, then what reason is there for us to roar?"

This was but one sentence in Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's presidential address at the Umno general assembly but it sums up the tone of his 90-minute speech — he spoke softly and the message was not lost on the Umno delegates.

Abdullah revisited his three years as prime minister and reiterated that values such as integrity, diligence, moderation, hard work and tolerance would continue to be the cornerstones of his administration's policies.

His speech was titled "Fulfilling Promises". And he renewed his pledge to deliver on the promises he made when he first took office. Some, he said, had been kept. Some would need a longer time. But the key message was: Nothing has changed, as far as his commitment is concerned.

His delivery was typically Abdullah-ish—no shouting, no threats, no playing to the gallery—unlike some of the debates at the Umno Youth assembly a day earlier.

And yet he made clear he abhorred the name calling, statements that hurt sensitivities, the corruption and abuse of power and the nit-picking that hindered the country's progress.

He did not name but influential people such as Perak Mufti Datuk Datuk Seri Harussani Zakaria and controversial Klang municipal councillor Datuk Zakaria Mat Deros would know that not only did the

prime minister not endorse their views and actions but he also firmly believed that they were wrong.

Not once did he mention former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad — his most ardent critic today — save at the end of the speech, to ask Umno delegates to pray for the former leader's good health and speedy recovery from a mild heart attack.

But he replied to Dr Mahathir the way an old world Malay gentleman would—tactfully and, yet, forcefully.

He would not turn back the clock on the freedom he had allowed to flourish although some of his colleagues were uncomfortable with the almost unbridled criticism against some of them in the media and felt that he had lost control.

"The truth is that I would rather see heated exchanges in the pages of the Press than raging riots on the streets," he said.

At the same time, he cautioned the

media that if they crossed the line on race and religion and affected public safety and security, "I will not for a moment hesitate to use the law against them".

He did not name names but he had the same warning for Harussani, who claimed thousands of Malays had converted to Christianity but did not offer any proof, and had said that it was un-Islamic to hold the joint open house during festivals.

"Have we reached such a level of intolerance? When did we become ultra-conservative? We must not and cannot allow this. It will not make us more Islamic if we do not greet another person on the occasion of their festivals, just as my faith is not shaken when I go to a Deepavali or Christmas open house.

"I promise you that I will take stern action against any group, Muslim or non-Muslim, that seeks to undermine this delicate balance by

questioning the status of Islam or by inciting people based on bogus allegations and fictitious threats."

When he became prime minister three years ago, Abdullah told Malaysians that he was a prime minister of all Malaysians.

Just as he did not spare his own colleagues and the Muslims, Abdullah also cautioned his component party colleagues from the MCA and Gerakan, and non-Malay based organisations and political parties that discussing sensitive topics should be done rationally and with cool heads.

Referring to the social contract — which has been raised by Gerakan and MCA leaders during their party assemblies — Abdullah had this to say: "Be aware that it is easy to cause misunderstandings. Conflicts can be easily sparked. Surely, this is not what we want.

"If there are those who want to overhaul this agreement or continue disputing it, then we run the risk of adversely affecting our stability and harmony. And the consequences will be catastrophic. I will not allow it to happen at any cost

"No one should even attempt to test the government's resolve on this issue. The government will act swiftly and firmly to ensure that our peace, stability and prosperity is not jeopardised."

As for Dr Mahathir's campaign against him and the government, Abdullah said he was willing to be advised and criticised as he knew that he had imperfections.

"Leaders are mere mortals. And mortals are imperfect. In seeking to better himself, man needs to be advised and to accept criticism. Therefore, advice and criticisms should be constructive and rational and offered with honesty and sincerity.

"Sincere and honest criticisms are intended to ensure that the one who is criticised will do things better; criticisms should not be aimed at destroying someone and to shame him; or to slander him. Allah's laws are severe against those who have bad intentions."

Abdullah, who comes from a family of religious scholars and is himself acknowledged as a man with strong religious grounding, quoted a verse from the Quran:

"Whosoever desires honour, (power and glory), then to Allah belong all honour, power and glory (and one can get honour, power and glory only by obeying and worshipping Allah (alone), by Him ascend (all) the goodly words, and the righteous deeds exalt it, but those who plot evil, theirs will be severe torment. And the plotting of such will perish."

When he finished his 90-minute speech with a prayer for the well-being of the country and the people, not many — save those who did not want to hear — had any doubts about the message.