

TODAY marks the end of the third year in office for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Three years ago in 2003, Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister ushered in new reforms on the basis of greater public space for intellectual discourse, greater transparency, public accountability and good governance.

People all around had tremendous admiration for his policies and gave the Prime Minister a resounding victory in the 2004 general elections.

On a personal note, Oct 31 is a very significant day to my family and me, as it is the birthday of both my mother Flora Jayaratnam and my daughter Jochebed Jayasooria.

Yet for one other reason it has tremendous religious and historical significance for Protestant Christians as it is the day when Martin Luther, the German theologian, posted his demands for spiritual reform which is ever since remembered as Reformation Day in Christendom.

My political awakening was kindled in the 1980s when there were tremendous restrictions placed on fundamental liberties. Most of us in civil society grew out of the *Operasi Lalang* and the repressive use of legislation by the state on free expression of public opinion. Most Malaysians were then under the climate of fear.

While there has been very little change in legislation since then to enhance fundamental liberties or strengthen judicial review, there is however more space for public discourse on alternative views.

Furthermore, there were new mechanisms created to enable people to voice their views through the Royal Police Commission and the various select committees established by Parliament to gather public views and input.

These are initiatives of the Abdullah government since Oct 31, 2003. It has created some space for the common good and we must build upon them for

social change.

It is within this framework that in the last three years many issues of discontentment, community concerns and issues have come to public light through journalists, opposition members or back benchers in Parliament, NGO and civil society leaders. The climate of fear experienced in the 1970s to 1990s is less apparent today.

More voices are being heard and alternate views expressed via the informal and formal channels. This however does not mean that things are getting worse as compared to before.

In this open policy environment certain public issues and concerns have emerged, which if not appropriately handled could snowball into major political distractions from the main agenda of the Abdullah Government, namely the effective implementation and delivery of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Abdullah must keep focus of the National Mission Agenda and the Ninth Malaysia Plan, ensuring that the effective delivery and targets are in line with the aspirations of the nation.

Like a captain of a ship in storm it is imperative for Pak Lah to keep the course. Whether it is a storm or a sea monster or pirates, the crew must pledge their loyalty to the one and only captain whom they trust to see them through the storm.

Furthermore the captain must remain selfless and keep the best interest of not only his crew but also the ship, ensuring its safe passage through the rough waters.

I am reminded of the extraordinary leadership abilities of Sir Ernest Shackleton on his ship *The Endurance*,

which was trapped in ice for 364 days during the Antarctica expedition in 1914. He exhibited outstanding ability to lead his team to overcome such seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

This is well illustrated in Dennis Perkins book entitled *Leading at the Edge*. Of the 10 leadership principles indicated, the first is of great relevance - namely never losing sight of the ultimate goal. Another is instilling optimism as many negative thoughts are gripping the nation and therefore there is this urgent task of not allowing people to lose hope.

Daily as I read the hard copies of *The Star* and *The New Straits Times*, the Internet versions of *Bernama* news and *Malaysiakini*, my heart sinks to see the political distractions becoming the centre of stage in Malaysian society.

The national concern to attract more direct foreign investment and to ensure a vibrant economy is of utmost importance. We must return to the basics, return to strengthening the economy and ensuring fair and just inclusion of all Malaysians for socio-economic enrichment.

We must not lose sight of the concerns of the poor, disadvantaged, marginalised and low-income families especially in empowering them through wealth-creation initiatives. Ultimately, ensuring that the promises made are delivered to ordinary people is what really counts.

I was shocked when I visited the Penan community in the Bintulu area and interacting with government officials at district-level to find that none of the poverty eradication allocations under the previous Malaysia plans had reached them.

Neither has there been any allocation made under the Ninth Malaysia Plan yet for this group.

It is a tragic shame that while some powerful individuals are fighting for their right to be heard after so many years in power that the poorest of the poor of Malaysian society are still

struggling in their fight for a right to live.

Why is there a delay? Why is the funding not being made available at the district-level for the relevant agencies to act with a sense of urgency?

I am also working on Malaysian Indian concerns. Many policy promises and programmes are indicated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan but effective delivery mechanisms are not clearly identified at the implementation stage, especially for equity and economic enhancement or urban poverty eradication.

In civil service recruitment, entrepreneur development and skills-training for youths there are institutions, but the outreach is too small and the impact is not large enough for radical changes for the bottom 30%.

It is this aspect of effective and efficient delivery that must be addressed. There are so many good programmes such as urban poverty programmes that have not yet got of the ground due to bureaucracy, red tape and delays.

Effective monitoring is another area, which requires tremendous thinking and incorporation of civil society and grassroots to be an effective watchdog for the Government.

While the Ninth Malaysia Plan has indicated the strengthening of the monitoring mechanism, I still feel that in-house mechanisms alone are inadequate.

There must be the creation of other parallel monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective delivery.

One possibility is a mini-Mapen (National Economic Consultative Council) team, which is multiracial and multidisciplinary, which can enhance the current approaches. Another could also be a series of select committees on specific matters relevant to the implementation of the Ninth Malaysia Plan in Parliament.

If Pak Lah continues to focus on the real issues of the ordinary people, give room for open dialogue and hearing of

voices however unpleasant, then I would feel there is still hope for the future. Pak Lah must ensure that questions raised do not mean disrespect or disloyalty. No issue must be allowed to be "racialised" but rationalised.

It should be discussed in a rational way and a solution must be sought. Even in the case of very sensitive issues such as religious conversion or methodology in the measurement of poverty or equity ownership there should be intellectual discussions to determine the best approaches for the common good of all Malaysians.

New avenues and platforms must be created for dissenting voices from within the Barisan National to be heard. Their views should seriously be considered within closed doors especially when raised by minority groups from within the Barisan. This will minimise outbreaks of differing and dissenting views.

One way forward is for Barisan to establish focus groups where thoughts, views and thinking out of the box could be effectively discussed.

This avenue might cut down too many dissenting views, sometimes conflicting with the Barisan Nasional Manifesto, among Barisan component parties championing their specific community concerns in public.

My final appeal is for Pak Lah to return to the very themes that gave him the overwhelming support of ordinary people.

Return to the issues of effective delivery, public accountability, transparency, fight against corruption, and good governance. It will ensure all the relevant institutions effectively fulfil the dreams and aspirations for a united and developed nation.

Views expressed in this article are the personal reflections of Datuk Dr Venison Jayasooria and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations he is associated with professionally or voluntarily.