

Abdullah and Mahathir must talk some more

THE four-eyed meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in Seri Perdana on the second day of Deepavali was a missed opportunity.

True, not many people put much store by the much-hyped meeting achieving much in terms of ending the public row between them. But, at the same time, it cannot be denied that there were also many who had hoped, maybe even prayed, that the meeting ends the six-month old public quarrel that had somewhat affected the government's capacity to concentrate fully on its work. This is especially so when the government had just launched, its Ninth Malaysia Plan and announced other multi-billion ringgit projects to develop the country, and to achieve vision 2020.

Optimistic Hindus had hoped that the "Victory of Light" would dazzle Abdullah and Mahathir into entering into some kind of rapprochement as the quarrel had gone on long enough. Optimistic Muslims had prayed that the two would be sufficiently overcome by the Ramadan spirit of goodwill and comradeship to begin stepping away from their entrenched positions and to work out something together in the best interest of the nation. The skeptics'

position is that reconciliation is difficult as both men had already, by their statements, driven themselves further and further apart.

Still, not all is completely lost. The important thing is that they met - even if they were nudged towards it - after months of talking only through the media. And Mahathir, despite his unrestrained attack on Abdullah after the meeting, had talked about a follow-up. Should that be agreed to, perhaps more thought should be put into planning it and drawing up the ground rules. If it is going to be another four-eyed meeting, the media, for instance, should be briefed on the outcome based on the points-agreed to by both 'sides. This would make it unnecessary for any of them to speak to the media unilaterally.

There is no doubt the two should continue to meet and talk if there is a genuine interest at all to end the public quarrel it may not be sound reasoning to assume that Mahathir's attacks could be ended by just ignoring them. Also he still has a lot of influence and clout for attempts to be made to marginalise him and to make him to be seen as an insignificant government gadfly to be successful.

Prospects for the landmark public quarrel to end through further meetings, four-eyed or otherwise, still seems to be a good option.