

'I speak because I believe in his vision'

Datuk Zaid Ibrahim raised eyebrows recently when he stood in Parliament and said that the government's reform agenda had slowed to a halt. KOH LAY CHIN speaks to him about his provocative view while Tangga Batu MP Datuk Idris Haron tells her why patience is a virtue.

DATUK ZAID IBRAHIM

Q: You have said publicly that the prime minister has yet to make real reforms. What do you mean?

A: The prime minister put forth a historic and paradigm moving manifesto in the 2004 elections.

He promised difficult but urgently needed reforms in the government and judiciary.

He promised to fight against corruption, restoring integrity in the government, transparency and accountability.

He spoke the language of change the people had waited for so long.

And he got the biggest mandate from the people to govern. When I said he failed to push reforms, I was saying that he had failed to get his ministers, the Chief Ministers and the civil servants with him on these issues.

That's why I said in Parliament that he must be prepared to do radical things, including getting the right people to perform the tasks.

Q: It would seem that for you it's more of a problem of the PM's "executioners" or his "team".

A: The prime minister is only as good as the Cabinet he assembles. It's quite common for the PM in other jurisdictions to reshuffle and change his Cabinet whenever he feels necessary for executing policies the government has undertaken.

I get the impression that the reason our Cabinet is so large was because the PM wants to be nice to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad by retaining those appointed by Dr Mahathir.

Did it appease Dr Mahathir? Not at all. Being nice in this way is not necessarily a good thing.

Would Pak Lah cause political instability if he were to undertake radical Cabinet change? Not at all.

Q: In your speech in Parliament, you commented on the openness in the system under the PM.

A: In my speech, I said the openness that we have in our society today is entirely due to Pak Lah's sense of trust and tolerance, a much desired trait in our leader.

But openness must have purpose and if not managed properly will only fester discontent.

Openness in the government means we must be prepared to amend the Official Secrets Act so that people will not use the Act to hide acts of corruption or incompetence.

Openness means all contracts must be by open tender save for certain legitimate exceptions and not the other way around.

Openness means sensitive matters are dealt with intelligently and objectively and not to resort to the closed-door bargaining style of the past.

The prime minister cannot do all these alone, he needs a team.

As to my suggestion for the un-



doing of the Dr Mahathir years, I did not mean to suggest that Dr Mahathir did nothing good. In fact he built Malaysia as a modern state with all the infrastructure and facilities.

The undoing of Mahathirism is the doing away with authoritarianism, with lack of accountability and the absence of the rule of law.

I believe the country will be better placed for the 21st century if the policies of human capital development, of transparency and accountability under the present PM are implemented. More so if the judiciary is fully empowered, and Parliament becomes a chamber fully accessible for the rakyat to see, watch and learn.

Q: Before Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over from Dr Mahathir, you said in an interview that you felt "reassured" because the person who was about to lead the country was a profound thinker and thought things through.

A: In an interview three years ago I said that I believed Pak Lah is man of integrity, and will be considerate in his dealings on all matters. Have I changed my mind about him? No. I want him to succeed for the sake of all.

Openness in the government means we must be prepared to amend the Official Secrets Act so that people will not use the Act to hide acts of corruption or incompetence.

Zaid

There are delicate issues that we face as a nation and we need a leader who is fair and considerate to all, which he is.

Am I disappointed with his leadership so far? Yes, maybe I was expecting too much but then again I don't know what his constraints are.

Still he himself said that failure is not an option, which suggests that he will fight.

Q: While other politicians have tread on these issues rather delicately, you are seen to have come out with guns blazing.

A: Was I not as discreet as others in my criticisms of the PM? I am a discreet person, but in matters of public interest you have to be open and forthright.

It's also because I want the prime minister to succeed. If not for him I would not be an MP today as I was not the first choice candidate for Kota Baru.

But that will not deter me from telling him what I think is good for the country and his administration.

If you believe in the PM's vision of integrity, of fairness and prosperity for all then you must help to realise his reforms, even if it means having to criticise him.

'Do not expect results fast'

DATUK IDRIS HARON

Q: Datuk Zaid Ibrahim has used strong words in alleging that the Prime Minister's performance has not been up to par. Is he justified?

A: It all boils down to the measurement one uses to define success or failure. I see a great deal of planning on the Prime Minister's part.

His rationale is that if you don't plan properly, nothing will be implemented.

So what Pak Lah has been doing in his 3½ years in office is planning for, among others, the successful implementation of the National Integrity Plan, the Ninth Malaysia Plan and the human capital plan.

We have to be clear on what to expect of the PM in terms of results. We cannot expect immediate results for long-term projects.

I personally feel that Zaid is a little impatient, which may have to do with him being an action-oriented person.

Q: Zaid feels that Abdullah's team has failed him by not delivering on issues like transparency, openness and integrity? Is this assessment fair?

A: I feel that all the ministers are already in one mind with Abdullah on the vision and mission for the future.

Of course, the first two years after 22½ years of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad have been difficult as Pak Lah had to deal with the baggage of the Mahathir era.

Pak Lah is still carrying "Mahathirism" in his administration — lock, stock and barrel, but not by choice.

I think the first, and probably greatest, challenge he has had to face is sweeping away "Mahathirism" from within his Cabinet.

He has achieved results as all ministers have taken to Islam Hadhari by inculcating its philosophy in themselves.

Q: What do you make of the PM's decision to retain ministers from the Dr Mahathir administration?

A: Pak Lah has retained some of them for continuity as they were involved for 22 years in building the nation.

The PM is trying to get the best of these people.

He's using them to create the 'software' for future de-

velopment of the nation.

It's certainly difficult coming from a different environment and way of thinking to an entirely new style of leadership and service.

We are going from an aggressive, dictatorial and authoritative style to one that is more patient and considerate.

I think it is a blessing to have a PM who can put right the aggressiveness of the 22 years with a "softer" style that endears itself to the people.

Q: What are the essential differences between the styles of Dr Mahathir and Pak Lah?

A: You have to think in terms of plans that both had for the future. Did Dr Mahathir have plans like Pak Lah?

If Dr Mahathir did, did they bear fruit?

Was there integrity, openness and transparency then?

Did you see *Bersih* (clean), *Cekap* (efficient) and *Amanah* (trustworthy) then? We have to be fair to Pak Lah.

Dr Mahathir did a lot for the nation but today, Pak Lah is going one step further by asking all of us to look within ourselves and to be honest about it. He is talking about how we, as individuals, can change ourselves to suit the times.

Only then can we change what is around us.

Pak Lah is saying today that the system is only good if people are honest enough to make it succeed.

He is saying that we have to change from within first for the system to succeed.

Q: There are others besides Zaid who think the Abdullah administration may be weak, a factor compounded by allegations of nepotism and complications arising out of Khairy Jamaluddin's (his son-in-law) role in the party?

A: You cannot stop people from commenting on things.

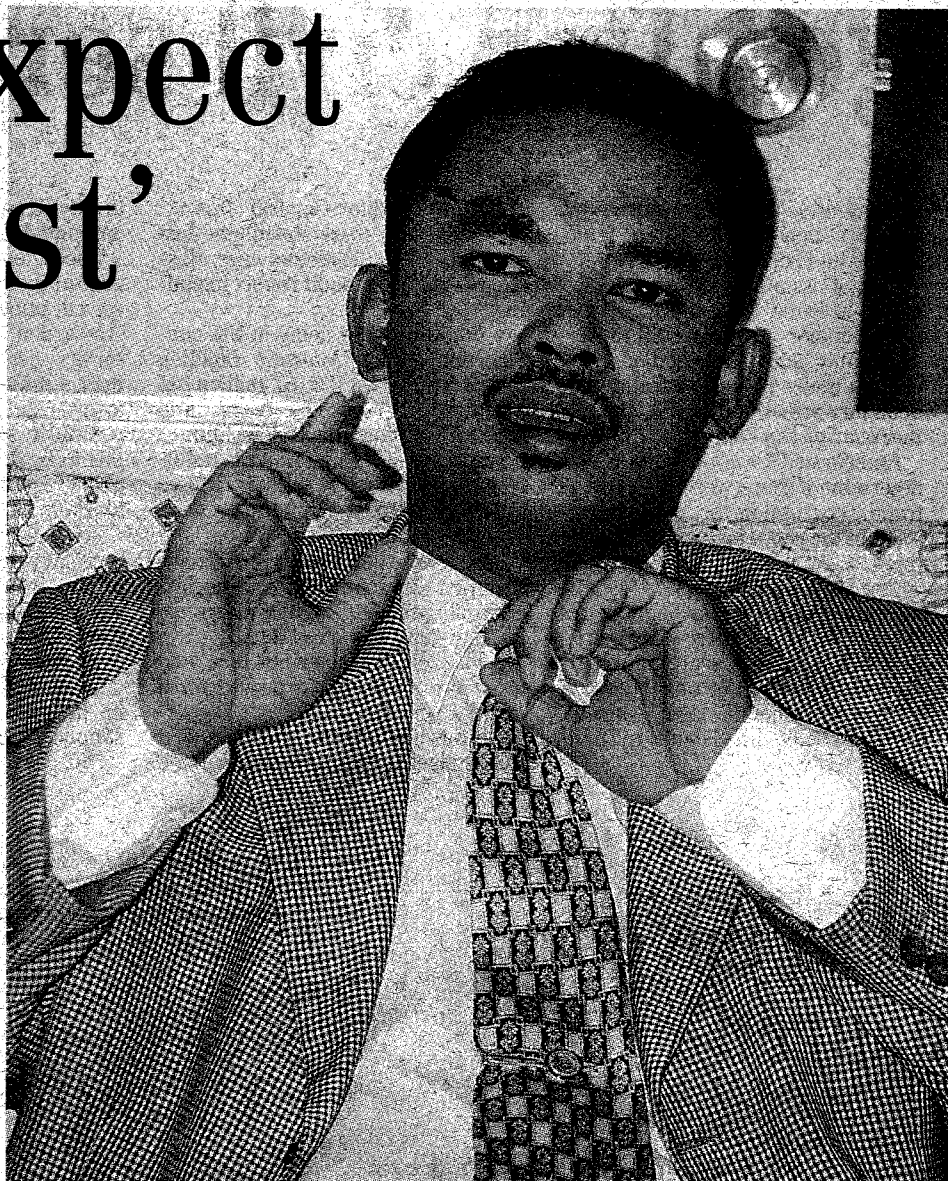
Pak Lah is open about constructive criticism about himself or others close to him.

He takes it in a positive light if such criticism can help improve his administration.

It is the same when it comes to negative criticism.

Pak Lah generally reacts positively even if the criticism is negative.

He has been creative in turning such things into op-



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Idris

portunities for improvement. Let me make one thing clear: Zaid and those who think like him do not represent the entire country.

I feel the people around Pak Lah have to be critical about what is happening in their area. We cannot have a situation like that of the *Emperor's New Clothes* fable, where no one told him the truth about what was happening to him.

We cannot blame Pak Lah if things go wrong, as he cannot be aware of everything that is happening in the nation.

It is the responsibility of the people around him to alert him to problems.

They should not tell Pak Lah that everything is good if it is not true.

Q: Zaid has called for amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA), awarding of contracts by open tender and ministers needing to leave certain decisions to technocrats and civil servants.

A: What he means is openness to the extreme. Are there risks involved? There are certain things we cannot be too open about.

If OSA and the Internal Security Act are watered down, what will happen if there is grave danger to the nation?

We have to meet halfway on this call for openness, with the need for certain parameters.

Politicians like me are very happy with the current level of openness.

Parliament is open, people

can criticise anyone in the newspapers and there is freedom of speech.

No one has been placed under ISA for speaking against the government.

Q: Will Pak Lah have problems at the coming Umno general assembly?

A: Umno is very stable today. The only thing that can shake the party is a fight for the number one position.

In 1997, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was preparing to go against Dr Mahathir.

But today, the Number Two (Datuk Seri Najib Razak) is in full support of Pak Lah. There is nothing to worry about.

Wanita Umno, Puteri Umno and Umno Youth are all supporting Pak Lah.

As for Dr Mahathir, we respect him and appreciate what he has done for the party and nation.

But we cannot support him. Why? Because he is not in authority anymore.

He is not the Prime Minister or party president anymore.

What Dr Mahathir says may be food for thought but that's about it.

I guarantee you that he will not get my support or vote.

It is Pak Lah's time now and he should be given the opportunity to prove himself.