

Pak Lah's speech breaks new ground

COMMENT BY WONG SULONG

WHEN Pak Lah spoke to the Umno general assembly yesterday as the party's new president, he broke new ground.

He did not say or promise anything extravagant or revolutionary in his 90-minute address, but by articulating the Malay Agenda from slightly different perspectives from those taken by his predecessors, he has moved to expunge the racial sting out of the New Economic Policy, opened up new vistas and challenges for the Malays and Malaysia, and defined his leadership.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is a Malay leader who is Prime Minister of Malaysia. As a leader, it's inherent on him to be fair and just to all.

Pak Lah - Son of Umno; Leader of Malaysia; Man of the world.

Taking over as Umno's new president, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is confronted with a global political and economic landscape vastly different from those of his predecessors. This poses unprecedented challenges for the Malays.

Up till now, a prolonged period of economic prosperity has enabled successive Umno-led governments, starting with Tun Abdul Razak, to implement pro-bumiputra policies to lift the economic status of the Malays without jeopardising inter-racial harmony.

But the 21st century geopolitical landscape is radically different from

that of the 20th century. While one can argue, with considerable justification, that the NEP had contributed much to Malaysia's economic progress and political stability, the age of globalisation means Malaysia will be left behind (meaning impoverished) if it is not internationally competitive. In the global marketplace, no one owes anyone a free lunch. This is the brutal truth.

So while Abdullah reassured the Malays that his government would continue with pro-bumiputra policies, the approach is qualitative, not all-embracing. The government will no longer distribute fish, but will provide the tools to enable the Malays to fish, and in deep sea too.

But ultimately the Malays themselves must rise up, and walk without crutches. To do that, they need to acquire knowledge and be prepared to work hard.

The Malays must not seek to find the government's shortcomings, but should look within themselves and find their own weaknesses. The transformation of the Malays begins with the realisation that it starts with the individual and the race.

"If we fail to hone the competitive skills of the race, we will eventually

become a defeated race. Malays will always be looked down upon; Malays will always feel insecure and lack confidence. Malays will always be seen as a burden by others," Abdullah warned.

There are already, of course, many successful Malay businessmen and professionals. They must do their part and help other Malays to rise up. Successful non-Malays should also help.

Pak Lah also broke new ground when he touched on the role of Umno. The party was formed 58 years ago to fight for Malay rights that were being threatened by the Malayan Union proposal. But Umno has evolved to be Malaysia's predominant political party.

While Umno continues to lead the Malay struggle, Pak Lah argued it must also be leader of all Malaysians.

This is a new role for Umno; one that enhances its legitimacy as the natural ruling party for the country.

It was only a year ago that Pak Lah (speaking as Umno deputy president to the Youth, Wanita and Puteri wing's) warned that Umno could not assume it would rule forever.

More venerable political parties in other parts of the world had come to grief through complacency, arrogance, corruption and abuse of power.

Umno has to earn the people's trust. The unprecedented support that Malaysians gave to Pak Lah during the general election last March represents

the people's trust in Pak Lah's leadership of Umno and Barisan Nasional.

A lot of this trust is due to Pak Lah's religious upbringing and his Islamic worldview, which he, for the first time, committed in writing in his presidential speech.

"Islam Hadhari" he said "is an approach that emphasises development, consistent with the tenets of Islam and focussed on enhancing the quality of life."

Islam Hadhari emphasises 10 main principles; namely: faith and piety in Allah, a just and trustworthy government, a free and independent people, mastery of knowledge, balanced and comprehensive economic development, a good quality of life, protection of the rights of minority groups and women, cultural and moral integrity, safeguarding the environment and strong defences.

Islam Hadhari goes back to the basics of Islam. It's an approach that will enable the Malays to remain true to their faith, yet seek the knowledge and material success vital for their survival.

Pak Lah's Islamic worldview is one that non-Muslims - in Malaysia and beyond - would be comfortable with and support

Without doubt, the address of Umno's sixth president and Malaysia's fifth prime minister to the Umno general assembly is a defining speech that will set a new direction for the country.