

Abdullah right man to bring about reforms: Zaid

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KUALA LUMPUR: Some may see Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as weak and unassertive, but for Kota Baru MP Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, he is still the best leader to push democracy forward in Malaysia.

Speaking on "Democracy matters to Malaysia" at *StraightTalk*, a dinner talk organised by the Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia last Thursday, Zaid listed what he believes are important factors for a strong and healthy democracy.

One is the space and freedom for public debate and discussion something that is lacking but, as Zaid admits, there is more today than ever before. Nevertheless, with the greater space today, it is important that civil society, NGOs, and citizens do what they can to push the envelope and have greater public discussion.

"We must train the public to see things as they are and not be clouded by bigotry or prejudices," Zaid said.

Foremost in democracy is that they must be prepared to discuss so-called sensitive issues. They must trust the good sense of the people

who have lived together for generations. They have developed economically, they are wealthy but they cannot sustain their wealth if they are bogged down by these issues.

"For example, in a democracy, all are equal under the law, Every citizen has equal rights under the Constitution but for some reason, we are not prepared to say this often. Everytime someone brings it up, we say 'no, sensitive'," Zaid said.

Other examples of "sensitive" issues include those related to religion, such as conversion and apostasy and the issue of Malay rights and privileges.

"When things are shielded from public discussion, it will create fear and suspicion and this is a threat," he told his audience of about 20. But his hope is in the prime minister.

"I think Pak Lah said the right thing about integrity and openness, because there is definitely more space now to talk about things, but a lot of people are unhappy with him, saying he is not assertive enough and other things, but all said and done, I believe the prime minister wants to change things. But he does not have the Mud of support within the party to do it, hence his perceived ambivalence and reluctance to

change things."

Zaid said it is not easy to change a system, which has been embedded for over 30 to 40 years.

"We have a strong foundation for democracy but over the years it has suffered, especially the judiciary, and it will take a while to recover. I believe our PM is our best bet for democracy to work. It may be slow but he has given us that window.

"I am 55. I am speaking as a democratic citizen who wants more space, more freedom and things that we value as a free society - integrity, transparency. Pak Lah has to deal with a lot of complicated issues and 'big Napoleons'. But I see the slow transformation - the changes in the law, the policies. He is strong when it comes to issues on religious tolerance and racial harmony and these are important issues for our future."

In a global world, he said, it is important for the people to be united and share resources in order to compete with outside "enemies".

"Malaysia is just a small country, so why not give priority to multi-racial harmony and reduce policies which are divisive? We still talk about affirmative policy, but this must be seen in the context of politics," he added.