

KEEPING THE FAITH: PM puts reputation on the line
Brendan Pereira
February 15, 2006
New Straits Times

Feb 14: YESTERDAY was not about the ebullient Datuk Effendi Norwawi being hoisted onto the political mainstage once again, two years after his health scare. It was not about International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz proving that there is life after the Approved Permits fiasco. It was not about Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor showing that there is no such thing as political oblivion in Malaysian politics. It was about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi putting his reputation on the line and banking on 33 ministers and 39 deputy ministers to deliver big over the next two years.

The stakes are high for the ruling coalition, and for the man who currently occupies the top job in the country. Fail, and the consequences will be grave.

He knows that the reservoir of goodwill which followed the Barisan Nasional's grand election victory in 2004 is emptying. He knows that after the pundits and armchair critics have exhausted all their arguments in coffee houses, the only thing that would really matter in Malaysia is this — whether the economy is humming.

He is aware that the next 24 months will define how well he is judged and how well the BN fares in the next election. There will be little wiggle room for Abdullah and his band of ministers.

Day One of their task will be on March 31 — the day the Ninth Malaysia Plan is tabled. Privately, Abdullah likes to use this analogy when describing the challenge that lies ahead for him and his team.

He says that Malaysia is at the base camp. His Government will have to provide the impetus to drive the country all the way to the peak by 2020.

Several new initiatives will be announced as part of the 9MP. But Malaysia has come unstuck in the past because the best plans have remained just that — plans. It is this concern that has influenced several of his Cabinet choices.

Rafidah scores poorly in the popularity stakes and will never lose that streak of abrasiveness. But she can work. Abdullah mulled over the possibility of appointing another senior politician to the portfolio but she has an in-built advantage over the other candidate — she can hit the ground running.

"I don't think there is anyone as capable as her at the moment. She also knows the mechanics of FTAs better than anyone else," said a government official.

Effendi was brought out of retirement because he has a track record of getting things done. During his tenure as a minister between 2000 and 2004, he carved a reputation as someone who preferred action to poring over feasibility studies. It also helps that he is from Sarawak.

Why? Because geographical considerations played a significant role in Abdullah's choices. With Natural Resources Minister Adenan Satem returning to state politics and Tourism Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad returning to family life, there was a need for a representative from the East Malaysian state.

Let's face it. Every Prime Minister operates within certain constraints when selecting his Cabinet. By convention, he has to include the head of component parties, even if some of them have been around forever. For political considerations, he has to include some members who will do the grunt work — not only will they be aggressive in their respective ministries but they will be his enforcers on the ground.

For sentimental reasons, he may have included some politicians who have been with him through thick and thin. Three names come to mind — Datuk Azmi Khalid, Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad and Datuk Aziz Samsuddin.

For practical reasons, he stuck with several veterans. If it ain't broke, don't change it. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin fall into this category. The PM views their portfolios as too important to be given to greenhorns.

For his Government's well-being, he must hope that all his ministers and deputy ministers implement the 9MP and help him create a buzz in the country. Do that, and the election down the road will take care of itself.

Source:

http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/nst/Wednesday/Frontpage/20060215074233/Article/index_html