

# Report card on Abdullah

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## He gets mixed reviews for his performance after three years in office

Analysis by Joceline Tan

**D**ATUK Annuar Zaini had spent last month in hospital recovering from a stroke.

But last week, he changed from his hospital gown into a colourful batik shirt and took leave from the hospital because he insisted on speaking at a conference on "a long-time friend."

The friend is none other than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and the conference came across as a sort of mid-term review entitled "Three Years in Putrajaya."

The direction he had set on education and human capital was lauded, likewise his open style of administra-

tion, and, most of all, that there was still much room for improvement in policy execution and the public delivery system.

As for Annuar, he spoke on corruption, an issue the Prime Minister had felt strongly about from the start of his administration.

He said if the Government genuinely wished to tackle corruption, it had to review the minimum wage of the public service support system. It was a fact that public servants in big cities could not survive on their wages and this gave rise to the need for side income.

At another level, he advocated firm action against officers with authority living beyond their means

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DATUK ANNUAR ZAINI

tion.

But they had issues with the widening gap between rich and poor, the slow progress in fighting corruption, greater efforts at race relations

and tarnishing the image of the public service.

"We can see some changes in the area of corruption but, generally, Pak Lah is like the soprano who has to

sing alone without enough support from the chorus or orchestra," said Annuar.

The civil servants took the brunt of shortcomings in the mid-term of Abdullah's administration.

The Prime Minister's plans, as Home Minister Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad pointed out, were first-class but the implementation was weak and this had been the case even before Abdullah's time.

Poor implementation was caused by various reasons: misunderstanding, confusion, lack of effort and even manipulation regarding policies and

plans.

It is certainly no fun being a civil servant these days - poorly paid and accused of all sorts of things. And as policy analyst Khoo Khay Peng pointed out, the civil service also had to be re-oriented to make efficiency and competency its key emphasis.

"The Government has to stop using the civil service as a social tool, for example, to absorb unemployed graduates into the service. If it is quality that they want, then they have to be very clear about who they take in," said Khoo.

Those around Abdullah have rea-

son to be concerned about the delivery ability of the civil service. Abdullah came in on a wave of support and promises. But a slow economy and the increases in fuel prices have made people a little more impatient than they might have been about delivery.

There have been improvements but not at a rate fast enough for most people. "The reality between what he aspires to and the reality on the ground is quite different," said Annuar.

Hence, the urgent need for the civil service to carry out the plans he and his team have worked hard to put in place the last few years.

If the civil service falls short on its role, Abdullah will bear the main brunt of public unhappiness.

Abdullah's problem at this midpoint of his mandate is not just about the civil service but also about the way his Umno grassroots want to take certain policies.

"The PM started off very well by emphasising human capital and the need for meritocracy. He knows we need that for the next acceleration, to propel us against the upcoming market competitiveness. But then we have all this talk about the Malay Agenda and the NEP and the need to incorporate it into national policies," said Khoo.

Abdullah has much to think about as he moves ahead from this midpoint.