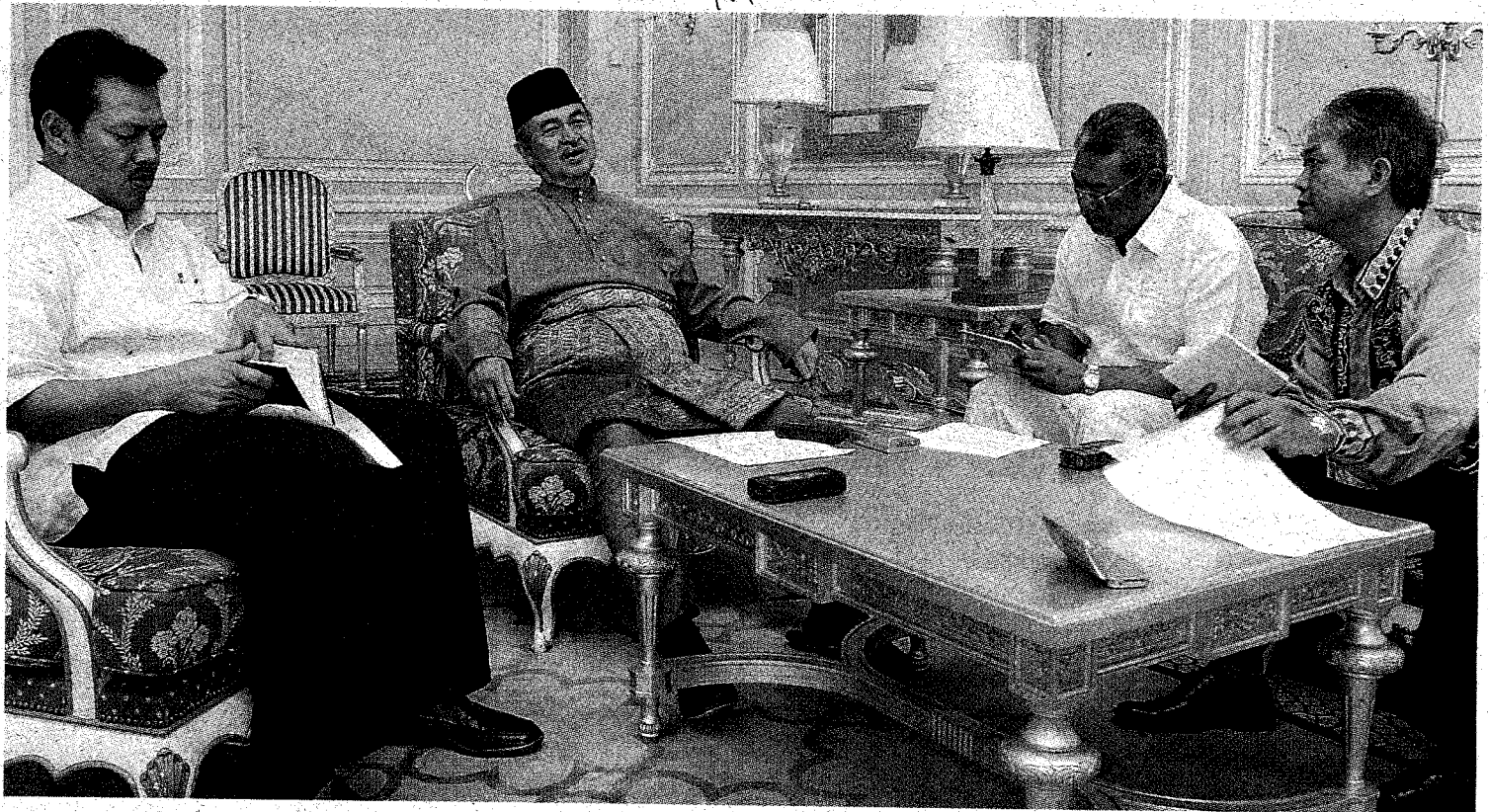


# We are gaining momentum

NST-28/11/2007

**Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi talks to HISHAMUDDIN AUN, MANJA ISMAIL and KADIR DIKOH on a range of subjects, from the Ninth Malaysia Plan to red tape, education and foreign policy.**



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi talking to NSTP group editor-in-chief Datuk Hishamuddin Aun (second from right), *Berita Harian* group editor Datuk Manja Ismail (left) and *Berita Harian* bureau chief for Putrajaya, Kadir Dikoh.

**Q:** The Ninth Malaysia Plan is now in its implementation stage. Are you satisfied with the progress and are you confident that implementation of the entire plan will be smooth?

**A:** I am confident the plan will be effectively implemented and will meet its objectives. Implementation has begun.

Some people are under the impression that I had launched the plan a long time ago.

But it was only in June last year, and just two months after the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) was approved by Parliament, that we began proper implementation.

Government development projects are carried out continuously. The 880 projects that I had announced earlier are being carried out by the various ministries.

We estimate that close to RM35 billion had been spent on development projects last year.

This shows that the government is implementing the national development agenda through prudent spending.

The implementation of the Regional Development Corridors has also begun. The Iskandar Development Region was launched last year and we expect investments would start coming in this year.

The North and East Corridors would be launched soon.

Work on other big projects like the Second Penang Bridge will start soon.

The allocation for development under the 9MP also includes the development of "soft infrastructure" such as government services, human capital development programmes, and grants to the private sector to fulfil development agendas.

This cannot be fully seen by the public the way they can see physical infrastructural development. But these developments are important to ensure the success of the 9MP.

It will definitely take some time before the full results are seen.

The important thing is that we are gaining momentum in implementing the Plan, and God willing, we will achieve our targets.

**Q:** The Ninth Malaysia Plan is touted as an economic transformation which also gives emphasis to the agricultural sector.

**A:** The agricultural sector will be the third contributing factor (in national growth) and will play a big role in the country's development.

We are certainly encouraging the growth of our agro-based industries. This will benefit people in the rural areas.

Previously, we emphasised more on producing high-value products but we could not sell our produce because of poor marketing.

For one, when there is over-supply, the price drops. For example, our durians are of a superior quality, but suddenly there is a glut and the price plunges.

So, in the end, despite putting in greater efforts, we end up with the same returns.

That is why I emphasise always that we should enhance our marketing efforts, and produce processed agro-products such as fruits and vegetables which have a longer shelf-life and, thereby, ensure that the earnings of those involved in this sector grow steadily and are sustainable.

The processed agricultural products will also increase in value.

By creating the demand for quality agriculture produce, we will be able to determine the markets and pricing, and earnings will be more stable and sustainable.

**Q:** There are those who criticise the government's emphasis on agriculture and say we are mov-

ing backwards.

**A:** I don't see how.

We are developing small- and medium-sized industries in the agricultural sector. We want our people in the rural areas to get more involved.

It is the rural areas which currently supply our agro-based needs.

When we set up small industries and factories, we not only provide a source of income for those producing (agricultural produce) but we are also providing jobs for others.

In fact, Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin has told me that by the end of the 9MP in 2010, we are targeting to have 10,000 enterprises which are agro-based.

This will give added value to agricultural products, create new avenues for growth and improve incomes of those in agriculture.

**Q:** Government policies will be successfully implemented if the delivery system is good. You have said before that poor delivery is an enemy to the smooth implementation of the 9MP.

**A:** If the problem of improving the delivery system is not resolved, it will become a major obstacle to the implementation of the 9MP.

We can kick-start the 9MP but it will not be as dynamic as we want it to be.

People closely monitor the delivery system and there have been many comments on the 9MP in relation to this (delivery system).

**Q:** Has the situation improved?

**A:** There are signs of improvements at district office level and higher levels.

Take passports, for example. The Immigration Department can today process passports in a day and visas much faster. This is just one example. There are many others.

People used to complain that the issuance of certificates of fitness (CF) was always delayed. The house is ready but it's a hassle to get the CF. I promised to get this improved.

For close to two years, people were still grumbling. I asked Ka Ting (Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting): "What happened? What is the progress?"

I told him: "This is an important matter. Find a workable solution, do not look for cumbersome solutions."

I told him the best way to do it is through disclosure-based applications where professionals provide guarantees and are held accountable.

If the information provided is later found to be wrong and not consistent with current policies and laws, action must be taken against them.

I fail to understand why they (the relevant approving agencies) are still reluctant to do this.

I told Ka Ting again that I want these processes to be expedited. Why is it so difficult?

Then it was said that there are 12 laws and regulations (that need to be fulfilled) before a CF can be issued.

Amend the laws then, I told him. If something cannot be carried out because of the laws and the regulations, amend them.

Last year, we passed these in Parliament. The amendments have been approved and I hope they can now be implemented.

We cannot say do it today, implement it tomorrow.

**Q:** Too many bureaucratic procedures?

**A:** Bureaucratic procedures, too many overlapping regulations... every department has its own set of procedures.

Can't we have uniform procedures? Can't we have a simple "yes" or "no" in a document? We need to simplify and shorten the procedures.

For example, is the design of a project in line with the law?

If the engineers and architects say "yes, it is", should the Public Works Department review it again?

**Q:** Do you think that there should be an improvement in the public service, particularly bureaucratic procedures?

**A:** Yes. Shorten them (procedures). That is the only way to get prompt decisions.

Hard work and giving priority to clients should be our work culture.

**Q:** Do you think the setting up of the special task force headed by the chief secretary to the government (Tan Sri Sidek Hassan) and comprising corporate leaders,

# in implementing the Plan

which you recently announced, would be able to address these problems?

**A:** Yes. This is the special task force's main objective.

**Q:** How do you see the views and criticisms raised at the recent "National Seminar on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi: Three Years in Putrajaya: Tracking the Country's Future"? In terms of policy, the participants felt there had been many benefits to the people but in terms of implementation, there seems to be two drawbacks — lack of understanding on the part of the implementers and bureaucratic procedures.

**A:** The first (lack of understanding of policies) does not involve the majority. The second, bureaucratic delays, must be quickly resolved. But when a complaint is made, it has to be specific.

Otherwise, we would not know if it is only a perception or hearsay, a repeated story or a genuine case.

If we receive a specific complaint it is easier to investigate and take action.

**Q:** Do you mean to say that our civil servants are generally good but are bogged down by many procedures?

**A:** There are laws but do it (work) quickly. But there are people who criticise all (civil servants) just because of the acts of a small group.

But, at times, certain actions by certain groups provoke anger towards the whole civil service.

**Q:** Are you giving a time frame for a better delivery system to be put in place?

**A:** What we intend to do now is to give a time frame to whatever we do. A lot of progress has been made.

I have told the chief secretary that it is time we listed down what action and corrective measures are taken, how it was done and to continue to improve so that the people would know.

**Q:** You seem bent on wanting to have this matter quickly resolved?

**A:** Yes, because this also affects the private sector.

Recently, we decided that foreigners could buy houses costing RM250,000 and above without having to obtain approval from the Foreign Investments Committee.

But the state governments still have to make the decision before the transfer of house ownership.

I have informed the state governments to amend this regulation, which is a hassle.

**Q:** How do we solve these problems?

**A:** Land-related matters come under state jurisdiction. If you are faced with a problem, tell us and we shall try to find a solution.

Abolish what (regulations) you

must. Find the best solution, how to make prompt decisions in a given time.

**Q:** Perhaps the ministers should direct their ministries to overcome such problems. They probably need to review all archaic laws and do away with unnecessary procedures.

**A:** Everyone must play a role.

The land office, for example. There are many procedures involved in land acquisition matters. These could be reduced.

**Q:** Moving on to the National Education Blueprint 2006-2010 which was recently launched. Do you think the blueprint can yield the desired results?

**A:** It is important. Back then, Malaysia was among the countries in the region which was open to foreign investment. But now, there are so many other competitors such as Thailand, Vietnam, China and India.

We need a shift in the economy so that we can be more competitive.

We need to develop value-added sectors such as technology-based industries, ICT (information and communications technology) and biotechnology. All these require expertise.

For us to succeed in these areas, we need knowledgeable, creative and skillful students.

This (emphasis on education) is not new. The government has been allocating a large budget for education, but now we not only want education but quality education, education that will give our youths an advantage to face the challenges.

We have to realise that education is a long-term effort. The effectiveness of the changes has to be examined before it is systematically implemented.

This is the way we present a quality, valuable and meaningful education to our younger generation. The action plan is the first step. We have no choice.

**Q:** Among the thrust of the blueprint is to strengthen the role of national schools, an issue which

some feel is quite sensitive?

**A:** Sensitive? In what way?

**Q:** In that the plan seeks to bring more non-Malay students to national schools. (Non-Malay parents fear what will happen to Chinese and Tamil national-type schools.)

**A:** I never thought this was sensitive.

The choice (to change to national schools) is in the hands of the parents. I don't see why this is seen as sensitive.

We want to enhance the role of national schools. We are not suggesting or planning to shut down Chinese or Tamil schools.

We will not close them, there is no reason to.

(Building up) the national schools (to have more Malaysians seeking education there) is a good thing, not something that is sensitive, or something which is unreasonable.

This is not a political gimmick. Education is not a political gimmick.

**Q:** Your hopes for the blueprint?

**A:** To me, this blueprint is pragmatic. Its objectives can be achieved.

But in education, besides proper infrastructure and teachers, parents play an equally important role. They can make the difference through their attitude towards their children's schooling.

Parent-teacher associations are very important.

Excellent schools are normally associated with parents and PTAs who play an active role.

**Q:** You have made efforts to improve ties with a few countries which were said to have had quite strained relations in the past, such as Singapore and Australia. You are seen to have a better and more diplomatic relations with leaders of superpowers such as the president of the United States. A few have criticised this, saying Malaysia is not as outspoken as it used to be.

**A:** There are many things that we can do to ensure we are really effective. We need not promote ourselves



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as champions.

All we want to do is the right thing, to say something which is right and to achieve our objectives.

**Q:** There are others who feel this approach has had many positive effects such as attracting foreign investments from countries which were previously not very comfortable with us?

**A:** Our foreign policy has not changed; only the approach is different.

**Q:** As chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference for the past three years, are you happy with the role played by Malaysia?

**A:** We have progressed a lot. We have given priority to economic development, increased trade and investment among Muslim nations, apart from our efforts to eradicate poverty and backwardness.

The OIC economic forum has been held twice — in Malaysia in 2005 and in Pakistan last year.

This year it will be held in Kuala Lumpur again. We want to empha-

sise on the efforts to expand the *halal* industry among the Islamic nations.

**Q:** How do you see Malaysia's relations with Iraq?

**A:** We co-operate with the Iraqi government elected by the Iraqis. It is a legitimate government and we cannot belittle a government elected by her people.

The Iraqi government must be fair to all groups in Iraq, be it the Sunni, Shia or Kurd.

Efforts should be made to promote national unity through a power sharing government. I have conveyed this to the Iraqi leaders.

**Q:** What about Malaysia's role in Asean now?

**A:** Good. Our relations with all (member countries) is good. All the Asean members are equally important. We must be strong and move towards greater integration.

**Q:** Out there, an environment has been created whereby your every step and statement is monitored and carefully studied. Even when you try to explain an issue, some quarters try to manipulate it. How do you face such situations?

**A:** I have to do what I need to do.

I know there are people who are trying their best to ridicule me. They make a mountain out of a molehill. They just want to rubbish me.

All this is expected in politics. No politician is liked by everyone. The most important thing is that I have the support of the majority.

**Q:** But do you think the criticism against you has gone overboard? If previously there were people who disagreed with certain matters the leaders did, the government did, today there seems to be more integrated efforts from a particular group to discredit you. This is most evident in cyberspace. Why is this happening?

**A:** Seems that these people are captivated by these tools, the SMS, electronic media.

They feel they are free, they cannot be disturbed and they can say whatever they wish to say. They do it (post comments) anonymously.

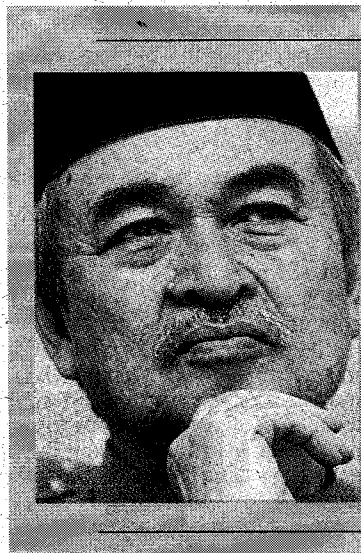
This sort of freedom had made them resort to such action (of spreading lies and making unfounded allegations).

Even bloggers or those who maintain websites use this opportunity to create stories. Lies after lies are being told. To them, everything is not right, everything is not good.

If I allow myself to be distracted by all this, I will not be able to do any work. That is what they want, that I not focus on my work.

My focus now is to ensure the 9MP is successful and I am confident that the nation is on the right track and is moving forward.

The economy is expected to grow. I feel more energised to fulfil Malaysians' ambitions.



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