

# PM: I still have some work to do before polls

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**PUTRAJAYA:** Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is keeping his options open on the timing of the next general election.

He said he still had unfinished business but refused to rule out snap elections.

He also said the return of opposition figure Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim into active politics next year would not tempt him to call early polls.

A general election is not due until 2009, but there is widespread speculation that Abdullah will go to the polls by the end of this year.

Abdullah, speaking in an interview with Reuters and CNBC, refused to rule out a snap poll but said he still had unfinished business from the last election, held in March 2004.

He dismissed Anwar's impending comeback as a temptation to call an early election.

"If I want to have an election at a certain time, that is not one of the factors," he said at his office in the

administrative capital here.

"There are many things that the Malaysian voters would want me to do to fulfil my promise to them and I think that I still have some more work to do — that's honestly what I believe."

Anwar was released from jail in September 2004 after he was acquitted of sodomy. But his corruption conviction, for which he had already served time, remained and this criminal record bars him from holding party or political office until April 2008.

On national car-maker Proton Holdings Bhd, Abdullah said the company was talking only to German carmaker Volkswagen AG about a strategic alliance.

But a decision on Proton was unlikely this week, he said, although Malaysia was still aiming for an end-March deadline.

Asked if a deal with Volkswagen, the world's fourth-largest car-maker, could be announced this week, he said, "I don't think so."

Asked if it was possible that a

foreign partner could pump equity into Proton rather than buy some of the government's stake, Abdullah said: "I would be happy, certainly, if they can bring in their own funds."

"It depends on the outcome of the negotiations. We are approaching this with an open mind."

Partnership talks between Volkswagen and Proton are at a "fairly advanced stage", local papers said last week, quoting Kevin Rose, VW's head of international sales, in Singapore.

Second Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yacop said earlier this month that Volkswagen and General Motors were among the local and foreign car manufacturers in talks for a stake in Proton, and that the government aimed to make a decision by the end this month.

Regarding the unrest in south Thailand, Abdullah said Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont needed to identify the lead-

ers of the unrest and make some sort of contact as soon as possible before his olive branches started to wither.

"I think there is a chance for him to bring down the temperature, but it depends on how fast such talks could be held."

In a separate interview in Bangkok, Surayud said: "We are not going to use violence to counter violence."

"We are not going to use the heavy-handed methods like in the past. We are going to follow the rule of law."

Surayud acknowledged that daily violence in the provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani — an independent sultanate until annexed by Bangkok a century ago — had intensified since he came to power.

However, he rejected the notion that a rise in mainly Buddhist self-defence militias, some of which have backing from Queen Sirikit, could lead to out-and-out ethnic civil war. — Reuters