

MALAYSIA

He's No Mahathir, And That's OK

Not even two months in office, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has begun to distinguish himself from his well-known predecessor by shelving a huge infrastructure project and shaking up the government's long-running status quo

By Leslie Lopez/KUALA LUMPUR

FOR SOMEONE who vowed no abrupt departures from the policies of his dominating predecessor, new Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi hasn't wasted much time setting his own agenda and distinguishing himself from Mahathir Mohamad.

In just over six weeks in office, Abdullah has shaken up the powerful civil service with personal spot checks on departments notorious for their shoddy practices and acknowledged that government corruption is a serious problem that needs attention. He has talked up rural programmes to woo the country's politically dominant Malay community. And he has displayed unexpected gumption by shelving a controversial 14.5 billion ringgit (\$3.8 billion) railway project and mandating the review of several other large and controversial infrastructure contract awards made in the months before Mahathir retired.

"Whether it's a conscious effort on his part or not, he [Abdullah] is emerging as a leader in his own right," says Azim Zabidi, chairman of Malaysia's National Savings Bank and a senior official of Abdullah's party, the United Malays National Organization, or Umno.

"All of what he is doing is very un-Mahathir and it is a very healthy change," says Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, who teaches sociology at the National University of Malaysia.

At least some Malaysian corporate executives believe that Abdullah is pressing the right buttons, too. "He's keeping his agenda very focused, placing emphasis on improving the country's software to keep up with our First-World infrastructure," says G. Gnanalingam, the executive chairman of Westport Malaysia, one of the country's main container ports.

After 22 years of think-big policies and in-your-face politics under the combative Mahathir, Malaysian and foreign businessmen are finding Abdullah's down-to-earth affability and consensual style a welcome breather. But the well-choreographed performance thus far has stirred

concern that Abdullah may be raising expectations of significant change too high, too fast. Unless he delivers on promises made in the early weeks in power, some political analysts say, Malaysia's new premier could stumble.

Abdullah's most immediate and biggest challenge is ensuring that the National Front coalition government he leads does well in a parliamentary election that is widely expected to be held before June 2004.

In particular, he must rally his own party, Umno, the backbone of the coalition. Umno lost significant political ground among ethnic Malays to the conservative Party Islam Se Malaysia, or Pas, in the country's last election in 1999. The election stakes make Abdullah's performance in coming months critical to his political future as premier and party president.

Umno has had to wrestle with a credibility crisis since Mahathir sacked his one-time protégé and heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, in September 1998. Anwar, who was later convicted and sentenced to long prison terms for corruption and sexual misconduct, has maintained that he was a victim of a political conspiracy to prevent him from challenging Mahathir for power. It's a claim many of Malaysia's politically dominant ethnic Malays, who make up about 60% of the population, take seriously. Among other

SETTING HIS OWN AGENDA

Abdullah is already distinguishing himself from his predecessor by:

- Shaking things up with an anti-corruption drive
- Shelving a big contract award made by the Mahathir government
- Sacking the head of *The New Straits Times*



ON HIS OWN: Abdullah has tried to make a difference since taking over from Mahathir on October 31

Photos: Jimin Lai/AFP

things, that led to a Malay swing away from Umno in the 1999 election in favour of Pas and a then new party dominated by Anwar supporters, Parti Keadilan.

Pas already controls the governments of two northeastern states, Kelantan and Terengganu. Although overwhelming non-Muslim support for the National Front virtually ensures the current government remains in power after the 2004 polls, Pas gains at Umno's expense would be a severe setback for Abdullah. Should Pas, for example, succeed in taking control of another state government in 2004, Umno's claim to represent Malaysia's Malay majority could crumble, jeopardizing Abdullah's position.

A weak election performance by Umno could invite an early challenge to Abdullah for the leadership of the party when it holds

its triennial elections, which are expected in the second half of next year.

To shore up his government's appeal, Abdullah appears to be signalling that he intends to fix long-standing problems that eroded popular support for the Mahathir government during its latter years. A main target: corruption.

Many politicians say that Abdullah's surprise spot checks on government agencies, such as the immigration department, should continue. "This Russian roulette with the civil-service departments shouldn't stop," says Astaman Abdul Aziz, a businessman and Umno divisional leader. "You've got to put the fear of God in them if they are to buck up."

By attacking an entrenched culture of red tape and graft in Malaysia's huge

bureaucracy, Abdullah believes that he can boost economic efficiency and at the same time bring in the votes, says a senior Abdullah aide.

This aide and other government officials say that the initial focus of Abdullah's clean-up campaign will be so-called front-line government departments, which deal directly with the public and which are often accused of corrupt practices. In addition to the immigration department, these include land registration offices, the police, the transport department and the customs department.

Abdullah also wants to temper his exposure in the media. Unlike Mahathir, who relished giving impromptu press conferences where he often set Malaysia's foreign policy with off-the-cuff remarks, Abdullah is expected to opt for more ►►

formal meetings with the media. Close associates say that national and foreign policy will be set and made public only after consultations with technocrats.

While the new premier, who also holds the Finance Ministry portfolio, has not yet unveiled his full economic agenda, senior administration officials say a reorganization of national priorities is under way, particularly with regard to the large infrastructure projects that Mahathir loved.

"His philosophy is simple: We can't be overspending. Projects which are too costly and that can be delayed should be shelved," says a senior financial consultant close to the government.

Already, Abdullah has indefinitely shelved a major project to build a double-tracked railway to run the length of Peninsular Malaysia. He has also called for a review of the 6.5 billion ringgit Bakun hydroelectric project in Sarawak state in Borneo. Mahathir's government awarded contracts for the two projects just before he retired. In both cases, companies controlled by Malaysian tycoon Syed Mokhtar Albukhary, a Mahathir confidant, were given the awards.

Several senior Abdullah administration officials had grumbled that the deals

were concluded hastily. The railway-contract award to Syed Mokhtar's Malaysia Mining Corp. conglomerate faced protests from the state rail companies of China and India, which had already signed letters of intent with the Malaysian government to build the railway.

"The thinking now," said a Finance Ministry official prior to the halting of the railway project, "is that we have got

Abdullah's first task in Umno will be the appointment of his deputy president, who, by tradition, would also assume the deputy premiership. The contest is widely seen to be between Umno's two most senior vice-presidents: Defence Minister Najib Razak and Domestic Trade Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Abdullah hasn't rushed to name his No.2, despite Mahathir's endorsement of

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to bring back applying the right processes in [contract] awards. There can't be short cuts."

Close aides of Abdullah say they hope that reverberations from his civil service clean-up campaign will shake up patronage-driven Umno, where Abdullah's hold remains untested. During Mahathir's 22 years in power, Umno acquired a reputation for practising money politics, both in its internal elections and in national polls, a development that alienated many who were traditionally Umno supporters and gave political ammunition to Pas.

Najib before he retired. "By delaying the appointment, he is showing that the candidate, even if it is Najib, will be his choice," says Shamsul of the National University of Malaysia.

Some political analysts are betting that Najib will get the job. But others worry that no matter who Abdullah picks, Umno could be weakened by fighting between party factions supporting the two candidates.

Still, senior aides to Abdullah contend that potential troublemakers will be kept in check: "He will have the final say on candidates for the [national] elections—these guys want to be candidates and they won't cause any problems," says one aide.

Abdullah has already shown that he can be tough. Three weeks into his tenure he abruptly sacked the chief editor of the Umno-controlled *New Straits Times* publishing group for an opinion article he wrote denigrating Saudi Arabia's government and royal family. Umno officials say that the editor, Abdullah Ahmad, was fired after the Saudi government expressed anger over the article.

Others say that the diplomatic flap with the Saudis was a convenient excuse to dump Abdullah Ahmad. *The New Straits Times*, under his editorship, had openly championed the selection of Najib as Umno deputy president and deputy prime minister, despite Prime Minister Abdullah's repeated requests to local editors not to play up the issue. "There are many theories on the sacking, but the message Abdullah is sending out is that he won't tolerate insubordination," says a close associate of the premier. ■



BUILDING BIG: The completed KL monorail. New projects will face new standards, says Abdullah