

# Abdullah keeps reforms on his agenda

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Despite continuous attacks against his leadership, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is determined to introduce reforms to the country.

**W**HEN Malaysians voted in record numbers for the Barisan Nasional coalition in 2004, the message being sent out was that they wanted reforms.

And when Barisan suffered its worst electoral results ever this year, losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament, the message remained the same. The public wanted reforms.

So a few days after this year's election, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi decided to make a go at reforming the country, like he had promised to do in 2004.

The other option before him was to quit, a choice that some within Umno and Barisan still feel he should consider.

But according to some of his advisers, the Prime Minister felt strongly that no matter how one looked at it, Barisan still won the 2008 general election. And he intends to govern, albeit with a smaller mandate.

"The Prime Minister was told, however, that if stayed on, it would be difficult to turn around the perception that he held the helm during Barisan's worst performance in a general election," one of the Prime Minister's advisers said.

The only shot at changing the way Malaysians perceived him, he was told, would be to introduce widespread reforms.

After 22 years of Mahathirism, the country had been ready for change in 2003 when Abdullah first took the helm.

But Abdullah found himself busy facing a protracted feud with former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who quite clearly did not like the kind of reforms that suggested that he had not always done the right thing for Malaysia.

After the March election results, the Prime Minister decided reforms were the only way to go to silence his critics and rebuild public support for Barisan, before he eventually hands over power to a successor.

Despite having his work cut out for him, he has moved quickly to introduce reforms.

In an unprecedented move, the Government has started paying out ex-gratia payments to judges who were removed during the 1988 judicial crisis.

This acknowledges a long-held view that Dr Mahathir's administration had been instrumental in the dismissal of the judges for ruling against Umno or the Government in certain court cases.

Last week, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Zaid Ibrahim announced a proposal to amend the Constitution, to bring back independence of the judiciary.

Despite not controlling the two-thirds majority needed for Constitutional amendments, Abdullah's government can expect significant bipartisan support to restore Article 121, as it will be seen as a step to return the independence to the judiciary which was removed when the Mahathir administration abolished the provision.

But it is not all smooth-sailing for Abdullah.

This week, a number of Umno ministers in his own Cabinet disagreed with the composition of Zaid's proposed Judicial Appointments Commission.

The Star understands that the Umno ministers are worried that with the proposed presence of a number of senior lawyers and former judges on the commission, the Prime Minister's powers to appoint judges will eventually be usurped.

Still, government officials are confident that



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the commission, which will be given powers to draw up a list of judicial candidates for the Prime Minister to consider, will be set up soon.

Besides judicial reforms, Abdullah has also promised to give more independence to the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA), and steps are afoot to model the graft-busting agency on its Hong Kong counterpart, the Independent Commission for Anti-Corruption (ICAC), because of the latter's highly-regarded reputation.

And now, the Prime Minister has also started the process of weaning Malaysians off fuel subsidies.

Subsidies are generally considered bad by most economists as they are subject to abuse, besides encouraging wastage and inefficiencies.

But the Government has had to withstand tremendous political pressure so far in raising oil prices.

Last week, the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), whose leader Datuk Yong Teck Lee had been a vocal critic of the Government's decision to cut back on oil subsidies, said it would support any motion of no-confidence against Abdullah.

Still, according to some of his aides, Abdullah is pressing on with his reform agenda - including the way business is conducted by the Government.

Last week, the Government decided against awarding the concession to manage and collect toll on the Second Penang Bridge to UEM Group Bhd.

Instead the concession will be tendered out to the highest bidder.

This could save the Government up to RM18 billion over 45 years, and stands in contrast with the way concessions were awarded previously, with highly favourable terms for the concession holder.

Except for the oil price hike, most of the reforms have for the most part been well received by the public and by businesses.

The problems being faced by Abdullah is that he finds that a number of ministers are not on the same page as him when it comes to pushing through reforms.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is committed to the same reforms as Abdullah.

And in the Cabinet, it is understood that Datuk Zaid, Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who recently approved a publishing permit for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat party organ, and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Shahrir Samad count as Abdullah's strongest supporters.

There are still some political leaders within Barisan who want the Government to maintain a firmer hold on the country and to have more control over the press.

But so far, the Prime Minister's reform agenda still prevails.

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