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the first 100 days

# Abdullah weathers the storm

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analysis by **Husna Yusop**

**WHAT** a nightmare the last 100 days or so must have been for beleaguered Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. A lesser person would have been reduced to a mindless and insane wreck before being forced to throw in the towel.

How he must have wished to wake up to discover that he had still to call the 12th general election. Unfortunately, he had and the nightmare is indeed real.

The BN losses are real and its prospect of continuing to rule at the federal level is under threat, his Umno and its partners are in trouble, his leadership of Umno is being disputed and his former boss is doing his damndest to force him out.

And to cap his list of troubles is the growing opposition to his government's unpopular move of substantially raising the prices of petrol and diesel two weeks ago. The mass protests have begun and their

organisers have promised that they will grow even bigger in the weeks to come.

But Abdullah, to his credit, refuses to buckle under and in the last 100 days has proven to be more man than the man he had shown himself to be during his first term as prime minister.

Some of his detractors are saying that he is determined to go on despite the many calls for him to step down because he is completely unaware of the gravity of the challenges facing him.

He must have disappointed many when a day after the March 8 general election and amidst the anger, disappointment, despair, anguish and the blaming game within the BN camp, he announced that he was staying and "will not run away from my responsibility".

While others, especially those from his own party, castigated him for that decision there were also those, within the BN coalition and outside, who praised

him for it, saying that in the chaotic situation following March 8, he was the only credible leader capable of holding the country together.

True, what the BN and Umno need now is a complete overhaul – a restructuring and rebranding – to prepare for the next general election, and Abdullah is seen by some of his party members and members of the coalition partners as not the man capable of providing the necessary leadership for that.

Be that as it may, those in favour of him continuing as prime minister say that by deciding to stay on, Abdullah had raised himself above BN and Umno politics to be a true leader of the nation.

His first test as a national leader was in accepting the results of the elections and refusing to countenance attempts at subverting them or being influenced by racist arguments of certain vested interests.

When his candidates for the *mentri besar* posts in



Perlis and Terengganu were rejected by their rulers who instead appointed their own choices, the stage was set for a major constitutional crisis.

Abdullah stood by his men at first but then probably realising that there were many more things needing his attention, he accepted the *fait accompli*.

Rather than embark on a divisive and wasteful confrontation and recognising the federal nature of the country, Abdullah, being the kind of person that he is, pocketed his pride and endorsed the MBs appointed by the rulers as, after all, they are also members of his party.

And as a master stroke in healing the rift between Terengganu and the federal government and also to prevent it from widening, he restored to the state government last week control over the 5% oil royalty which Putrajaya had been administering after PAS captured the state in 1999.

Ten days after the general election, he

managed to cobble together a cabinet which he can, since becoming prime minister at the end of 2005, finally call his own. As was to be expected, he could not please everyone but since March 18, his government was up and functioning.

And then he embarked on fulfilling his many priorities, especially two major tasks which he promised he would do when he became prime minister – restoring the integrity of the judiciary and rooting out corruption.

His announcement in April of a commission to oversee the appointment of judges and putting to rest the ghost of the 1988 judicial crisis was well received by the legal fraternity and the public.

Also well received was his announcement on April 21 for the Anti-Corruption Agency to be made into a full-fledged commission to be answerable to Parliament by the end of the year.

And to placate the disgruntled MPs from Sabah and Sarawak who had complained in Parliament

and elsewhere that their states had been neglected in terms of development, Abdullah visited them a few days ago and announced a package of projects and aid to help them.

There is no denying that the rush to put many things right even during the first 100 days of the new BN government had a lot to do with what the voters had decided – denying the ruling coalition its two-thirds majority in parliament.

Many people are still pessimistic about the BN continuing to be the government at the federal level beyond the next 100 days but if it does survive until the next general election without any major political change or upheaval, some credit must surely go to Abdullah.

And, at that time, those that he had managed to win over to his side would not hesitate to paraphrase Shakespeare in saying that there is indeed "a method" in Abdullah's apparent appearance of being weak and indecisive.