

The Abdullah agenda well established

NSR-24/7/2004: 11 Perdana

THE BIG PICTURE

By Munir Majid



SUCCESSFUL TALKS: Bush listening to Abdullah addressing the Press in the White House on Monday. — AP picture

— a result of his temper and demeanour as the leader of our nation when dealing with the leaders of other nations.

The improvement of relations with Singapore has been sweet, although it would be unrealistic not to expect difficulties over the many matters that remain outstanding between our two countries. The main thing is the desire Abdullah has forged, with his Singapore counterpart, not to quarrel over them in a dialogue of the deaf.

On the wider canvas of international affairs, Abdullah is acknowledged as a leader of distinction from a successful multi-racial and multi-cultural country distinguished by the practice of true and moderate Islam.

From this acceptance, his views on issues such as terrorism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the situation in Iraq, carry weight with world leaders, making him better able to put across the perspectives of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) which he leads.

The successful talks with President George Bush in Washington, President Jacques Chirac in Paris and Prime Minister Tony Blair in London, have all been possible because Abdullah is recognised as the fully and democratically supported leader of a highly successful country who thus has been able to present the viewpoints of his country and the organisations he represents with greater credibility.

In nine months, Abdullah is established and recognised as a pre-eminent leader in the world, fully endorsed at home and well respected abroad.

All this is fact. And it is good for Malaysia.

And Abdullah is not the kind of man who will let it all get to his head, as is often the case with many, many leaders. Remember, his first reaction to Umno's full endorsement of him as president: He will work hard and not let the party down; not some lofty, platitudinous pomposity.

Abdullah, simply, will want to perform, and certainly must expect to receive criticism as there is bound to be frustration in dealing with the many intractable issues he has rightly and bravely identified. His mark as a true leader will be made.

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AFTER stamping his mark as the nation's leader since becoming Prime Minister at the end of October last year, with his new verve and emphasis on service and performance, and after obtaining the unprecedented support of the people in the general election in March, it is only appropriate that Umno should demonstrate its own full endorsement of Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi as its president.

This it has done in an overwhelming fashion by returning Abdullah, and his chosen deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, without the need for a contest at the Umno general assembly in September.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's attempt to put up a challenge sputtered and petered out, except for a single nomination from his own division, reflecting his complete isolation from what the rest of Umno wants.

Tengku Razaleigh unfortunately lives in the past, and will be consigned to the past. Umno looks to the future under the dynamic leadership of Abdullah who talks about change and challenge, not about a sense of place and entitlement.

It is worth noting that Abdullah's first reaction to the endorsement of his position as Umno president was to say he would work hard, that he would not let the party and people down.

This reflects his political ethic, humility and service, "I will work for you as you work with me, not for me."

For anybody not to recognise this democratic predisposition, and to talk about democracy purely in terms of a pre-defined means to an end, but not in terms of being constantly measured once having achieved the end, betrays the difference between those who want to get a position and those who want to serve in office.

Having been given this overwhelming endorsement, Abdullah expects to be watched and judged against the implementation of policies he has enunciated, fully supported by people and party. It is not the end of the story. It is simply the means to an end.

The Agenda

The agenda is well established. Rooting out corruption, for instance, takes place also in

Umno by fighting against money politics. There are some allegations already of the use of money to gain votes in the party elections thus far. These will have to be seriously investigated to indicate a no-nonsense attitude, and the more transparent the process — including exposure of and action against frivolous and baseless allegations — the more reassured the people would be.

There would be more to come as the party election heats up in the next stage, the contests for the posts of vice-president and membership of the Supreme Council. These would be intense. The electoral college of 2,600 delegates would be the clear target, making it perhaps less difficult to zoom in on allegations, but also making it more likely that such allegations are thrown about in the carnival of party politics.

At the end of the day, Umno must show zero tolerance for money politics if it is to rid itself of the scourge, with no protection for anyone based on position or influence. As long as money politics is endemic or tolerated in Umno, it would cut the ground from under the Prime Minister and party president's feet, and the agenda to root out corruption in the country and party would look like an empty vessel.

There are the more positive things to do, such as the identification of position with service to people rather than service to self, improving the standard of service and level of performance of responsibility, bringing up the capability of the Malays by giving them opportunity through affirmative action, the building of a united Malaysia where all the races do not feel excluded or insecure. The building of an even more successful society and economy.

The Leadership

Abdullah's performance has been excellent thus far. He has identified the right areas that

need attention for the people and country to push ahead. These have been mainly the soft areas of development, always the more difficult to bring about, to give a more abiding and meaningful quality to it.

He has introduced measures to effect that improvement, such as those to enhance performance in government-linked companies but, while some of the groundwork has been laid, the people are looking for similar measures to improve the overall performance of the public sector.

With the endorsement he has been rightly getting, the demand on implementation of fully-supported policies actually increases, making it incumbent that evidentiary results are seen.

There are expectations that the renewal and regeneration of Umno which, again, Abdullah has initiated, would result in better government, not only in level of service quality, but also in the quality of the people chosen to serve in it.

There is talk that Abdullah might want to re-visit the composition of the Cabinet after

the party general assembly to give it a representation reflective of a revitalised Umno.

The conditions are right for further initiatives, given the endorsement of leadership, of policy objectives, of the process of regeneration and infusion of youth into party and government and, not least, given the strong and positive performance of the economy, which altogether give rise to the "feel good" factor, always a better time to bring about change.

The Stature

Abdullah has also attained a stature in the country and abroad which many might not have expected when he became Prime Minister.

The outcome of the general election, of course, was stupendous. And now, this full Umno endorsement.

However, Abdullah's performance in foreign policy has also been outstanding, an outcome of his previous long association with it, but also — perhaps even more importantly