

ABDULLAH GIVES A GLIMPSE OF WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR NATION

'My dreams, my greatest challenges'



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By Kalimullah Hassan
news@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. — Four days before taking the final step to becoming Malaysia's most powerful man, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi considers this to be his main challenge: Balancing his duty as leader of the economically lagging Malay majority population and his responsibility to other ethnic groups.

In the customary presidential pre-Umno general assembly interview with the *Mingguan Malaysia* newspaper, Abdullah, who will be confirmed as Umno president on Sept 23, was forthright about the "great challenges and enormous obstacles" that lay ahead for him.

"There are great challenges; and equally great obstacles. I am not only expected to guide the Malays but also to generate changes that can make them more successful. (But) I also know that as Umno president and chairman of the Barisan Nasional, I am leader to all Malaysians.

"They (other ethnic groups), too, have expectations of me. The president of Umno is expected to chart the future of the country and of Bangsa Malaysia. This is my greatest challenge," Abdullah, 64, said.

Abdullah was handpicked to become Prime Minister on Oct 31 last year by his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest serving Prime Minister. He also became acting Umno president. Earlier this year, he was elected unopposed to be party president. And he will assume that post from Sept 23 when he delivers his inaugural presidential address.

Both party members and the

country alike are waiting to hear his speech as it is likely to outline his political views and the direction he wants the country to take.

The last several weeks, Abdullah has stolen time from his schedule to closet himself with close aides to prepare his presidential address.

In the *Mingguan Malaysia* interview, Abdullah gave a glimpse of what Umno members can expect in his address which will be debated during the three-day main assembly beginning Thursday.

Abdullah said he wanted to see Malaysians change their mindset, their work ethic and always stay hungry for new knowledge with the end objective of making Malaysians "a people of excellence, glory and distinction".

In this respect, while acknowledging that the indigenous population had come quite far from the early days of independence, he was as disappointed as his predecessor, Dr Mahathir, that they lagged the drive to become even more competitive and more independent to meet the challenges facing them.

"If I knew what the problem was, it would be easy. I ask myself why it is so difficult to change the Malays. In today's environment, where so much aid and advantages are given to them, they may be in a comfortable position. Maybe.

"But it will take time to change their attitudes, a long time. Maybe 400 years of colonisation has made us unable to compete. The British colonial rulers did not want to see the Malays succeed in the economy and education. Malays were told that they were just good enough to be farmers and fisher-

'Foremost importance to society'

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men and should strive to be only a little bit better than their fathers.

"That killed the spirit of ambition within them and they only strived to be that little bit better than their forefathers. Maybe people will dispute what I say but if we can identify the reasons, then it will be easier to solve the problem.

"We have achieved independence. But the tough part now is to realise the full meaning of independence," Abdullah said.

Abdullah said he wanted to see a Malay race that was knowledgeable, that could stand tall and hold its own against others; a Malay race that was successful in any field it ventured into.

But he was not all doom and gloom about the pro-

spects of realising this vision he had of the Malays. "Nothing is impossible. God willing."

Abdullah said there were many Malays who had succeeded in various fields and had shown that as a race, they were as good as anyone. Nevertheless, in multi-racial Malaysia, Malays lagged behind when measured against the success of the other races.

Abdullah said the gap between Malays and non-Malays has to be narrowed to avoid other problems.

"The question is how we can narrow this gap," he said, adding that it would be one of his main challenges.

He said in his speech, he would touch on the issue of successful Malays not extending a helping hand to less successful Malays. "I

have been told that when a Chinese-owned company faces problems, other Chinese businessmen, their guilds and chambers of commerce help them." But in the case of Malays, this did not always happen, he said.

Abdullah said both the Malays and non-Malays had their own needs and demands that they made of the Government. In this respect, he cautioned all Malaysians to be politically sensitive.

"All the races in Malaysia have their own aspirations. We have a great responsibility to balance the needs and requirements of the various groups," he said.

However, he said that in deciding this balance, foremost importance would be given to the effect such decisions would have on Malaysian society and the country.

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