

Can Adenan survive where Pak Lah fell?

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Sarawak chief minister Adenan Satem has been a breath of fresh air 14 months into office. Yet his refreshing moves are reminiscent of former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's early days and raises the question of whether Adenan is set for a similar downfall.

As an unprecedented crackdown on corruption unfolds in Sarawak, there is a sense of déjà vu given inevitable comparisons between new chief minister Adenan Satem and fifth prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Both took over from decades-long reign of respective predecessors. Both have marked their early days in power with eye-catching progress against power abuse and corrupt practices.

What remains to be seen however is whether Adenan can stay the course where Abdullah, affectionately known to Malaysians as Pak Lah, could not.

Pak Lah's war on corruption

Like Adenan, Abdullah seemed a breath of fresh air when he became prime minister on Oct 31, 2003, succeeding Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was in power for 22 years. However, he ended up a casualty of the expectations he set.

Starting out, Abdullah was an instant hit with Malaysians. And his hit song was his administration's public campaign against corruption, which followed longstanding criticism of the same plaguing various facets of government during his predecessor's time in office.

There is little wonder why his war on corruption caught public imagination – the net caught some big fishes. In February 2004, fraud charges were brought against a former managing director of Perwaja Steel, at the heart of a long-running financial mismanagement scandal, and a federal minister, both in the same week.

Abdullah's corruption fight subsequently brought the Barisan Nasional coalition its biggest victory ever in the 2004 general election when it won 198 out of 220 seats, even re-taking the Terengganu state from opposition control.

However the war ultimately disappointed the public, who expected more big heads to roll. His promises to reform the judiciary, civil service and the police were seen unfulfilled in his first full term.

And he was told in no uncertain terms about this in his second general election as Barisan Nasional leader. The coalition scraped through the 12th general election in March 2008 with its narrowest victory margin ever, losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time.

Abdullah eventually succumbed to pressure calling for his resignation by April 2009, but not before warning his party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) that it would die out unless it stops suppressing dissent and discriminating against non-Bumiputeras.

Adenan defies expectations

Like Abdullah, Adenan's early days as chief minister has come to be defined by his tough stance against corruption. And like Abdullah, he has gained traction ahead of his first polls as leader of the state Barisan Nasional.

Few would have expected much when Adenan was handpicked by his predecessor Abdul Taib Mahmud to take over after 33 years in power. For decades, the state had been largely serene despite growing controversies and criticisms against Taib's 33-year administration, the most major being allegations of power abuse, cronyism and corruption involving state natural resources and land.

Sarawak was also an oddity in Malaysia: no other state had been ruled by two successive chief ministers from a minority race who are also from the same family for more than four decades – Taib, a Melanau, followed his uncle both as chief minister more than three decades ago and as state governor upon stepping down last year.

Yet few would have been right: one of Adenan's first acts was to promise none of his family members would get lucrative logging licences or alienated state land, a reference to longstanding power abuse allegations against Taib's administration.

More popular moves followed as Adenan broke away from his former brother-in-law's policies.

He now has a Facebook page with a reasonable following. Sarawak reduced electricity tariffs after the rest of Malaysia saw increases. Two bridges in Sarawak will

soon be toll-free and the public expects more to be so. Adenan also gave millions in funding to Chinese independent schools.

And he even received a state opposition delegation in the chief minister's office recently, which was never done during Taib's era.

But these popular moves aside, what catches public imagination about Adenan is his tough stance against corruption, an irony considering he was chosen by Taib over other candidates seen as preferred by the federal government.

Unprecedented changes

The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC)'s unprecedented headway this month follows Adenan's earlier tough stance on illegal logging in Sarawak, a touchy subject long subjected to international criticism.

Last November he got the chiefs of the six biggest logging concession-holders in the state, often referred to as the Big Six, to sign integrity pledges and warned the industry, both the private and public sides, not to "mess with (him)".

"Some (officers), of course not all, pretend they don't know. The reason is very simple; either they are stupid, cowards or corrupt," Adenan reportedly said on the lax enforcement against illegal logging.

In a televised interview on national media Radio Televisyen Malaysia this year, Adenan did not shy away from the topic and repeated his warning to state officers involved with logging enforcement to buck up.

Against corruption, this month had seen a flurry of activity as MACC reportedly homed in on nine high-ranking directors of various state agencies suspected of power abuse and corruption. It also froze RM4 million in personal assets belonging to an assistant minister being investigated for corruption and power abuse.

In the meantime, the MACC-led Ops Gergaji (a 400-personnel effort involving various state entities that was launched on May 12) froze more than half a billion ringgit in assets suspected to be linked to illegal logging, although Adenan requested these be unfrozen for the benefit of salaried workers in the timber sector.

On the international front, Adenan opened his arms to Taib's biggest international critics, including whistle-blower website Sarawak Report and Swiss-based non-government organisation (NGO) Bruno Manser Fund, where Taib had consistently shut them out.

Among those he engaged was Lukas Straumann, who authored a book released last year investigating alleged corruption in Sarawak's timber industry and how it ties back to Taib. Sarawak Report previously reported a persistent effort from Taib to ban the book and prevent it from being launched.

When they gatecrashed a London function Adenan was attending in early May, Adenan raised eyebrows by asking them to stay. He went further by promising no new logging concessions would be awarded and lifted a longstanding entry ban on Sarawak Report's founding editor into Sarawak.

Altogether these developments pose a curious question: What is driving Adenan's moves? And one possible answer is inevitably the looming state polls, which must be called by June 2016 at the latest.

Adenan's acid test

The coming state elections will be Adenan's first real test. He has signalled his intention to stay by asking for more time in the hotseat to carry out his promises for the state.

And at 71 years of age, it is now or never for Adenan. His will not be another three-decade dominance like Taib's. At his age, it would be reasonable to presume another term or two at most.

Against this context, the crackdown on corruption which so far has netted an assistant minister, may also be seen as a signal to his political camp.

Yet whatever his motivations are in the swathe of changes from his predecessor's policies, one thing is crystal clear: like Abdullah, he has raised the expectations of the urban populace in terms of governance, especially against corruption.

How will this translate into voters' support will be clear in the coming polls. The urban voters have slowly sided with the opposition in recent years as access to allegations against Taib's administration grew. Adenan's popular actions, which

sometimes put the federal government in awkward positions, may swing some back to his side.

And therein lies the second, ultimate acid test for Adenan: if he gains his own mandate for the first time, can he meet the new expectations he has set? His political survival may depend on whether he can as tapering momentum may provide ammunition for his political rivals.

As recent history has shown with Abdullah, the price of failure can be swift in coming.

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