

**A new vision for Malaysia**  
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**Simon Elegant**

Makcik Esah is tired. It's nearly 10:30 p.m. in Kangar, a country town on Malaysia's northwestern coast, the night is hot and humid, and the man she has been patiently waiting for hours to see, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, is late. But neither Esah, a 60-year-old rice farmer, nor any of the several thousand other people present are budging from their plastic chairs, which are tightly packed under a large white tent pitched on a field in the center of town. Finally, Abdullah arrives, moving slowly down the center aisle of the tent toward the podium, grasping rows of outstretched hands as he goes. His speech given without notes is classic Abdullah, much of it delivered in an easy avuncular style laced with a few self-deprecating jokes about his inability to be on time. Before long, Abdullah warms to the subject of how and why Malaysia is the most economically advanced Islamic nation in the world. Islam encourages Muslims to pursue economic development, he says, citing three verses from the Koran to bolster his thesis, two of them delivered from memory in the original Arabic.

Esah, a devout Muslim, says she has voted for the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) in every election since 1974. But when Malaysia goes to the polls on March 21, she will cast her ballot for the government, she says and for one reason only: Abdullah. She likes the Prime Minister's religious pedigree his father and grandfather were both Islamic scholars, and Abdullah himself has a degree in Islamic studies and the way he balances religious duty with an emphasis on economic development. "His religious background is ample," says Esah, "and he also seems a good man, decent, soft-spoken and courteous."

Malaysia's upcoming general election is turning into a referendum on Abdullah. Though the 64-year-old took over from his long-serving predecessor Mahathir Mohamad only four months ago, he has already, to the surprise of many Malaysians, dramatically altered the country's political landscape. Belying his reputation for caution Abdullah spent 12 years in the civil service before entering politics and retains a distinct bureaucratic taste for lengthy policy discussions and consensus decisions the new Prime Minister has moved aggressively to address a range of neglected issues that have long been the subject of popular concern: widespread corruption, rising crime, reform of the police. Abdullah has also curbed what was once the routine awarding of big government contracts to select businessmen, and has managed to put Muslim fundamentalists on the defensive through his own strong but moderate Islamic credentials. He has sought to counter stagnation and cronyism in his own party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), forcing out an unexpectedly large number of Old-Guard incumbents and replacing them with younger candidates. His reformist drive has left the opposition with no issues to use in their election campaign, a confident Abdullah told TIME in an interview last week at his modest family home near the coastal city of Penang: "There are little complaints here and there, but nobody bothers about them because I am addressing all these problems."

Abdullah has good reason to be confident. The National Front government coalition which is led by UMNO and in one form or another has ruled the country since independence in 1957 is almost certain to retain its two-thirds majority in the federal Parliament. Still, because of the nature of Malaysia's complex multiethnic politics, even fairly small shifts in the current balance of power could translate into far-reaching changes for the nation.

Much will revolve around decisions made in the polling booths by members of the ethnic

Malay majority voters such as Esah. Muslim Malays constitute about 65% of the country's population, with Chinese accounting for 25% and the remainder mainly of Indian descent. UMNO lost a quarter of its parliamentary seats in the 1999 polls, mostly to bitter rival PAS. Humiliatingly, the ruling party's share of the Malay vote dipped several percentage points below 50 for the first time ever. Should Abdullah fail to regain some of that lost ground, the knock-on effects for Malaysia could be serious. Any further inroads by PAS would be a "real red flag for foreign investors," says a senior Western diplomat in Kuala Lumpur. Gains by PAS could force UMNO to try to beef up its own Islamic credentials, a process that some fear could snowball and push Malaysia away from the Western-oriented, investor-friendly path it has pursued since independence.

On the other hand, if Abdullah wins enough to follow through on his antigraft campaign, argues Daniel Lian, an economist at Morgan Stanley in Singapore, Malaysia could garner a "significant economic benefit." Lian figures that the country may have lost as much as \$100 billion since the early 1980s to corruption. The war against graft is the "single most important" factor in Malaysia's economic development in coming years, wrote Lian in a recent report.

Will Abdullah retain his anticorruption fervor? His admirers say the forces that have driven him to pursue this crackdown are at the core of his character, forged by his religious faith and his experiences as a civil servant, notably when he served as a senior officer on the National Operations Council, the body that took over running the country in 1969 after hundreds of people died in racial riots caused in large part by social and racial inequities. "Abdullah is not your conventional power-hungry, conniving politician," says Chandra Muzaffar, a prominent social activist and former opposition politician who served with Abdullah on several high-level government committees and has known him personally for two decades. "He really believes government should be responsible to the people, and he is committed to achieving these aims while he is in power."

Others are a little more cold-eyed. While former Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam talks of Abdullah's "deep inner conviction," he also notes there is a significant political gain to be had for Abdullah in distancing himself from his predecessor. "Many people, including me, have been very pleasantly surprised at how much he has done in such a short time," says Musa. "But in order to be credible, he had to be different." Universiti Malaya academic Terence Gomez holds a similar view: "Abdullah stands to gain political mileage, especially among the large middle-class electorate who are unhappy with the rampant corruption in government."

UMNO's own problems are another reason Abdullah is shaking things up. The party has traditionally been the standard-bearer for Malays. Through an affirmative-action program that has been government policy for more than 30 years, UMNO gives Malays special access to jobs, businesses and school places, and protects their culture and faith. The goal is to ensure Malays don't lag behind the other races, but the policy has also been a proven vote-getter among the Malay population during elections. (Not surprisingly, the policy is much less popular among the Indian and Chinese minorities. But with no credible Chinese or Indian opposition parties to turn to and with only a small minority able to swallow the prospect of voting for rigidly Islamist PAS, Malaysia's ethnic minorities have voted with increasing unanimity for the ruling National Front.)

In recent years, however, UMNO has lost much moral authority among Malays. It's been riddled by infighting and been widely perceived as corrupt. The party has also been hurt by the controversial sacking and jailing in 1998 of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, once Mahathir's heir apparent and briefly a political challenger. Anwar is still in

prison, having served five-and-a-half years of his combined 15-year sentence for convictions on abuse of power and sodomy charges. Many critics in and outside Malaysia have questioned the fairness of those court trials, and Anwar himself has repeatedly asserted that his troubles started only after he challenged Mahathir. UMNO, says Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia expert at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, "is its own worst enemy."

By embarking on a cleanup drive, Abdullah should be able to improve the public's perception of UMNO especially among Malays. Already he has backed up his oft-repeated speeches railing against corruption with a swath of prosecutions of mid-level officials and businessmen. There have also been a handful of more high-profile prosecutions, notably the charging with corruption of Kasitah Gaddam, the Cabinet minister who oversaw lands and cooperative development, and of tycoon Eric Chia, who was closely aligned with Mahathir. (The former PM has so far been studiously neutral on the topic of Abdullah's war on corruption.)

Also, in what appeared to be a direct slap in the face for Mahathir, Abdullah announced in January that he was indefinitely suspending what would have been the country's biggest infrastructure project: a \$3.8 billion replacement for the country's dilapidated railway system. The contract had been awarded by Mahathir in his final days in office to a consortium led by one of his favored businessmen, Syed Mokhtar al-Bukhary. Abdullah says all government contracts will now be awarded on the basis of open tenders, another 180-degree turn from Mahathir's dispensation of goodies. Social activist Chandra says critics shouldn't confuse the Prime Minister's affability with weakness: "There is an iron fist under the velvet glove."

Sitting on a plush, purple armchair in his family's traditional Malay wooden house, Abdullah seems willing to show a little more of the iron fist than usual, emphasizing with uncharacteristic sternness that there will be no compromises or exceptions in his drive to curb corruption. Over his shoulder are large photos of the people whom friends say are the three most important influences in his life: his mother, father and grandfather. Those seeking to understand the apparent contradiction in the Prime Minister's character the steel beneath the smile need only look to the personalities of the two imams, says Abdullah's childhood friend Mohamed Mohamed Noor. "His grandfather was very, very tolerant and soft and caring," says Mohamed, "but his father was more rough, more forceful. [Abdullah] possesses both sides."

Indeed, when the Prime Minister talks about corruption, there's more than a touch of his father's stern gaze on his normally smiling face. Abdullah flatly rejects a suggestion that his antigraft drive will lose steam once he has won a mandate of his own. "It's not a political ploy," he says, his voice devoid of its usual warmth. "I will continue with my crusade against corruption." It's now up to Malaysia's voters to give Abdullah the backing he needs to fulfill that welcome vow.

With reporting by Baradan Kuppusamy/Kuala Lumpur and Mageswary Ramakrishnan/Penang

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