

PM strikes back

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KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi fought back last night, hitting out at critics and denying accusations of nepotism and defended his squeaky-clean image.

After months of turning the other cheek, refusing to respond directly to criticism by his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the premier finally answered some of the most sensitive allegations.

He denied that his son, Kamaluddin, and son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, have benefited including getting government projects from his position as prime minister and finance minister.

Kamaluddin is the biggest shareholder in the oil and gas services company Scomi Group while Khairy owns a small interest in the investment bank ECM Libra Bhd.

"Kamal (Kamaluddin) never misused his relations with me. Kamal was never involved in local companies or concessions. No. He never asked any help from the government. Never in anything that needs bail-out," said Abdullah, who took over from Mahathir on Oct 31, 2003.

On Khairy, he said: "He bought shares to become a partner in ECM Libra ... I knew he took a loan for that purpose. There is no proof that he seized government projects"

Abdullah, who was billed as Mr Clean, and his cabinet have ended up facing the same kind of allegations that haunted Mahathir during his 22-year tenure. The irony is that Mahathir, 81, himself is leading the charge.

Mahathir feels betrayed by Abdullah's decision to shelve some state projects that were proposed by the previous government. He has also lately attacked the business dealings of Abdullah's family members.

Excerpts of the 40-minute interview with Bernama chairman Datuk Mohd Annuar Zaini aired by TV3 last night:

On why he did not personally answer Mahathir's questions:

"I chose to keep silent because I do not want to quarrel with Tun in the newspapers. Tun himself had said in a statement he made, he felt hurt because he did not get the information he wanted. He hopes to be informed. If the PM does not speak, let the ministers speak.

"It is the people who want to know what is happening. This is what is being done and it is true the cabinet ministers prefer if I don't talk. Many people feel if I don't talk is better. Many people told me not to talk, (it will) cause confusion. Don't. Allowing the ministers to answer is enough."

On being "Mr Nice Guy":

"There are times I have to be very careful ... One thing I realise since I became prime minister, I know whatever decision I make, be it good or bad, many people will feel the impact. If I made a bad decision, the consequences will be bad. If there is a good impact on the people, I thank God for it. But what worries me is that if it turns out to be wrong ... not good, a lot of people will suffer and face hardship ... this is what I am afraid of"

On his attitude which is considered "too soft":

He prefers to be a respected leader than one who is feared by the people as opined by the political scientist Nicolo Machiavelli.

"I don't believe. As a Muslim, Machiavelli's approach should be practised. Cannot. We cannot legitimise anything to achieve what we want. I do not hold to this philosophy," he said.

Adopting a soft or harsh attitude is not an important thing to be a leader but more importantly is to uphold the truth and justice.



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Being gung ho not PM's style

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"If what is done is the truth and fair, then there lies the firmness in the decision. There is no need to be 'gung ho'. I am used to make decisions and some among them are difficult for me. There is no need to show off. That's my style."

He always monitors the running of the government including the actions by cabinet ministers and reprimand them when necessary. "I reprimand them during the cabinet meeting, over the telephone. That's my way of reprimanding people, while in the car, I'll phone them."

On accusations of mismanagement in his administration:

"This is slander, if they are sincere, write a letter, be brave because you are telling the truth. Tell us and we will take action. I want them to prove how, what information, where he got the information from. If they cannot produce (evidence), then they should face the consequences."

On increasing impatience with him after securing a big reform mandate in 2004 elections:

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On whether the government has the money to pay for the 9MP:

"We have the money and we can take it out. Previously, when I took over the country's administration, the deficit was quite high and if it is left unchecked, it will continue to rise and bring about negative implications.

"So, time was given to address matters relating to the deficit, but we succeeded ... I managed to reduce the deficit."

On monitoring 9MP projects:

"We have ministers, they have to implement the projects. If they cannot, we'll replace them. That is what I want. The policies and strategies have been determined." - Reuters/Bernama