

# Speech clarified many doubts

NST-16/11/2006

## ■ News analysis by Abdul Razak Ahmad

WHAT stood out for most Umno delegates and observers yesterday was how concise Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's presidential address was.

Political observer Professor Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin said the 90-minute speech was the briefest keynote address since Abdullah became Umno president. "It's the most focused so far on what he wants to do," said the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia academic.

For many delegates and observers, the speech came across as one where Abdullah answered his critics, explained his style of administration, issued a warning not to abuse the greater freedom he's allowing, and detailed where he wants to lead the party and

government in the years ahead.

The Umno address is no common speaking engagement. It sets the stage for the annual gathering and affects the direction of both party and government.

What did Abdullah's keynote address this year set out to achieve? A simple framework was given to some experts who were contacted to suggest input.

Abdullah wanted to revisit a 12-pronged mission he outlined in one of his first speeches to Parliament after becoming prime minister three years ago. It covered a broad spectrum of sectors — ranging from economic growth to national unity. "The main question he wanted to look at was 'where are we now on these 12 areas?'" explained a party insider.

The address, he said, needed to do three things — allay concerns over Abdullah's leadership style;

reply to critics in a reasoned manner; and provide effective examples to back his case.

It wasn't just to close party ranks in light of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's criticisms and ahead of the next general election, but to impact a wider audience.

"He openly focused on many groups in his speech — Umno members, politicians in the Barisan Nasional and the Opposition, the business community, academics, and leaders present and past," noted Shamsul.

Some of Abdullah's reminders, like how the greater freedom to express views should be carefully managed, were directed not just at specific groups like the media, but to Umno members as well.

"I think even some of our own people still need to fully understand Abdullah's style of leadership," said supreme council mem-

ber Datuk Shafie Apdal.

"Some have yet to catch up with how to manage things like the greater freedom he's given."

The question in the days ahead: How well will Abdullah manage to reach out to his audience?

"I think he will. For the first time, he explained in detail reasons behind decisions on a range of issues including the economy to freedom of expression," said Alor Star Umno divisional committee member Guntor Tobeng.

"He showed us he is gentle but firm (*lembut tapi tegas*)."

As Sabah's Kinabatangan Umno chief Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin put it: "The speech clarified for us that our president has neither lost control nor direction."

How the delegates will take his speech will indicate how effectively Abdullah's message has filtered to the Umno rank and file.