

Now the brakes are on...

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KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday put the brakes firmly on the debate on race and religion, noting it had reached a worrying level.

He said he was all for a more open landscape, where government policies and leaders could be criticised by the media and where issues could be discussed with gusto. In fact, he urged Malaysians to embrace openness, noting that it was one of the facets of the information technology age.

But there are limits to everything, he said, including the freedom of speech.

"The openness we see today is a new phenomenon for Malaysia. There are those who are adapting to it and there are those who want to test the limits of this openness.

"There are those who are inclined to take extreme views and this invites equal reaction and ob-

jection from others.

"This is a learning process for us. At the same time, it is equally imperative that we maintain stability until society finds its equilibrium," said Abdullah.

He was disturbed that matters enshrined in the Federal Constitution were being challenged, namely the special privileges for Malays and the special position on Islam.

The social contract was born out of a detailed examination and took into account very complex and sensitive considerations.

"It will be all too easy to undermine these sensitivities by making extreme and unreasonable demands and questioning the basic fundamentals of one community.

"If there are those who want to overhaul this agreement or continue disputing it, then we run the risk of adversely affecting our sta-

bility and harmony. And the consequences will be catastrophic. We cannot allow this to happen. I will not allow it to happen at any cost.

"I warn that no one should even attempt to test the government's resolve on this issue. If the need arises, the government will act swiftly and firmly in enforcing the existing laws to ensure that our peace, stability and prosperity is not jeopardised."

Abdullah also pointed out that the Constitution clearly states that Islam is the official religion of the country.

"I promise you that I will take stern action against any group, Muslim or non-Muslim, that seeks to undermine this delicate balance by questioning the status of Islam or by inciting people based on bogus allegations and fictitious threats."

Earlier this month, a hoax SMS

warning of a mass Christian baptism of Malays sparked a large protest outside a church in Ipoh.

But while he urged the media and Malaysians to stay clear of debating sensitive issues in public, he said that greater freedom for the media was here to stay.

"Leaders of the government, Umno, Barisan Nasional and elected representatives are not immune from criticism in the media. But there are those in government and in the party who are uncomfortable with this freedom.

"But freedom does not mean one can be absolved from responsibility. We cannot and will not compromise when it comes to the unity and harmony of our multi-racial and multi-cultural society. I would like to warn those who abuse this freedom that I will not hesitate to use the law against them."