

ON 8 February Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's brief 'honeymoon period' was over. One hundred days had passed since he took up the mantle of leadership, and enough time had been given to him to step out of the long shadow cast by the enduring presence of Malaysia's previous – and longest serving – prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Before Badawi assumed office many observers had thought his would be a case of regime continuity. Others presumed that after the flurry of promises and cosmetic changes, things would fall back to normal and that the ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) would carry on as before. Those who thought so would have been forgiven, for 'regime continuity' has indeed been the byword in Malaysian politics since independence in 1957.

From Tunku Abdul Rahman to Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn and all the way to Tun Mahathir, the helm of the state has been firmly in Umno's hands. Its ruling elite have grown accustomed to thinking that they had the 'natural' right to rule, as well as a 'natural' right to the spoils of government.

The introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 was meant to address the problem of uneven distribution of wealth between the various ethnic groups and to end the association of wealth differentials with ethnic differences. Though it may have looked good on paper what it really did was to pass to Umno near total control over the economy and turned it into the biggest and most influential patronage machine in Malaysia.

Since the 1970s Umno extended its

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Now the hard part for Badawi

power into practically every sphere of social, cultural, economic and political life. It bought control of newspapers and media outlets, and imposed its ideology on the state and society to the point where it was almost totally hegemonised.

Two decades of Mahathirism entrenched Umno's power further, though cracks were beginning to show by the 1980s. The government's claims to want to eradicate the problem of corruption, cronyism and nepotism were checked by a succession of major corruption scandals and economic bugbears, from the BMF scandal in 1983, to the Mamico scandal of the mid-1980s, up to the collapse of Perwaja Steel in the 1990s and the controversy surrounding a number of 'mega-projects' (such as the longest bridge in the world, the highest building in the world, and the gigantic Pergau Dam project).

Despite the fact that Malaysia's Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) was formed in 1967 and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) during Tun Hussein Onn's time, few corrupt businessmen and politicians have been bagged. Dr Mahathir had also left behind the legacy of a deeply divided Malaysian society and a host of repressive laws that had been used freely during crises. Nationwide 'security crackdowns' had taken place in 1987, 1988, 1993 and 1994, leading to increased antagonism and a severely restricted local media.

However as soon as Badawi came to office he announced that he wanted to open up Malaysian society, introduce more accountability and transparency in the governmental process, defuse tension between the political parties and patch up relations with foreign countries, particularly Singapore.

A seasoned bureaucrat himself who was also known as a practising Muslim (he majored in Islamic studies and comes from a long line of 'ulama), he introduced a number of measures that has taken the country by surprise. As the Malaysian academic and activist Dr Chandra Muzaffar has noted:

'If Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has made an impact in the 100 days that he has been in office, it is because his agenda for the nation reflects the aspirations of the people. He has promised to improve the public delivery system, eradicate corruption, enhance transparency and strengthen inter-ethnic harmony. He has not just articulated goals; he has implemented concrete measures. From shelving the 14.5 billion Ringgit (RM) double tracking rail project to the establishment of an independent Commission of Inquiry that will examine the performance of the Malaysian Police, Abdullah has proven that he is a competent leader courageous enough to make bold decisions.'

Indeed the announcement of the establishment of the 'Special

Commission to Enhance the Operations and Management of the Royal Malaysian Police' has stunned many. Not least for the reason that those appointed to it come from a wide spectrum of Malaysian society, including the former Lord President Tun Salleh Abbas, Tan Sri Azizan Zainal Abidin (Chairman of Petronas and a noted bureaucrat with a squeaky-clean record), Tan Sri Lee Lam Thee (an ex-politician turned activist), Tunku Aziz Tunku Ibrahim (Chairman of Malaysian Transparency International), Datin Paduka Zaleha Zahari (High Court Justice of Shah Alam), Khutubul Zaman Bukhari (Malaysian Bar Council President), Ivy Josiah (Malaysian NGO activist), and others. The fact that Tun Salleh Abbas has been brought into the Commission suggests that a break from the confrontational approach of the Mahathir era has already begun – Tun Salleh was an arch nemesis of the Mahathir government in the late 1980s.

However for the new prime minister to succeed, he will have to address some very serious real obstacles both within and without his own party. Umno today gives the distinct impression of a party out of touch with the public, unpopular with the young and too used to the easy life.

In the words of Dr Chandra Muzaffar: 'Prime Minister Abdullah is operating within a deeply entrenched system of power, privilege and prestige. As a group, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition has exercised overwhelming power and authority for more than 46 years. Consequently, the trappings of power, like the privilege of incumbency, has become a habit. Because the BN has been so dominant for so long, the vested interests which have become intertwined with its power will not take too kindly to reforms aimed at curbing their excesses.'

He adds that: 'The bureaucracy and even the political elite would be terribly uncomfortable – to say the least – with the sort of independent scrutiny that is inevitable in the Ombudsman system which incidentally owes its origin to the institution of Hisbah in early Islamic civilisation.'

But can the prime minister ('Pak Lah' as he is popularly known) really go against the dominant mindset that has been the *raison d'être* of Umno for half a century? After all, it is Umno that is really responsible for the narrow ethnic mindset that prevails in Malaysia and which has made Malaysian society so divided as it is.

As Chandra argues: 'Because ethnicity legitimized in the political, economic and cultural facets of Malaysian life has become so pervasive, ethnic boundaries have become more and more sacrosanct. Interaction among Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, if it occurs at all, is largely functional. This is why in their perceptions of institutions, policies, issues and personalities, the ethnic factor is always lurking in the recesses of their consciousness. In such a situation it is inevitable that there would be very little emotional bonding between the different ethnic communities. Without inter-ethnic empathy, no multi-ethnic society would be able to survive a serious communal crisis.'

Pak Lah will therefore have to walk the tightrope of Malaysian politics, balancing the needs and demands of a myriad of constituencies ranging from the Malays of his own Umno party to the non-Malays and non-Muslims within and without the ruling coalition and the rest of Malaysian society as well.

Besides, he needs to bridge the generation gap that has grown so blatant in the country, as well as the rural-urban divide that has been widened, thanks to two decades of rushed – in many cases heedless and unrestrained – development. Then there is the foreign investor community to consider, and the tinderbox of local sensitivities that has been kept in check only by the creation of an expansive and powerful state security apparatus, which has been used and abused to keep Umno and the ruling BN in power.

For local activists and observers the choice is clear. Pak Lah has to initiate reforms from within and to undo the host of repressive laws that have tarnished the image of Malaysia and crippled the development of democracy and human rights: 'To make dialogue and discourse really meaningful, laws which deter people from participating in the democratic process should be abrogated. This means that a whole gamut of restrictive, often draconian laws ranging from the Publications Act to the Internal Security Act should be repealed at some point or other. At the same time, the mass media, especially those newspapers and television stations linked, directly or indirectly, to the government should adopt a more evaluative approach towards the national leadership and public policies.'

For a quiet and unassuming, almost

humble, politician Abdullah Badawi is truly in the hot seat. His reforms are bound to antagonise some sections of the public and the government apparatus, yet he needs to stick to them while defending and promoting the Malaysian cause and national interest internationally.

Malaysia is now caught in the devious and all-consuming web of American interests, with the whole Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) region being designated as the 'second front' in Washington's unilateral 'war against terror'. With countries like the US, Europe and Japan still ranking highest in Malaysia's list of import and export partners, the prime minister cannot afford to alienate potential allies but at the same time cannot bend over backwards to accommodate Washington's increasingly biased and irrational demands.

Moreover the economy is passing into a critical stage with some of the less viable economic ventures of the past beginning to fall apart. The Malaysian national carmaker Proton, for example, is facing huge difficulties in operating in an open international market.

With all these odds and challenges stacked before him though, Prime Minister Badawi seems to have kept his cool. He needs to open up more and listen to a cross section of the public. Previous prime ministers have been seen as aloof, pushy, almost dictatorial in the way that they hoisted their agendas on the Malaysian people. But Malaysia today is a different country with an increasingly urbanised, sophisticated electorate and a younger generation impatient for change.

Malaysia also needs a period of calm, stable, corruption and scandal-free politics without executive interference or the meddling of Umno in public affairs. It is a maturing society that will no longer accept or tolerate the excesses of the past such as the cavalier use of the Internal Security Act whenever Umno of the BN is in crisis.

When he came to power Prime Minister Abdullah declared, 'my hand has never signed an ISA detention form.' But his hands have already been stained thanks to the arrest of students who are alleged to be members of clandestine militant groups. Will the hands be stained further? Or can the same hands change the course of Malaysian history and restore to Malaysian politics the sanity and order it deserves? As a Malaysian activist said: 'We can only wait and see.'