

by A Kadir Jasin

Matching Words With Deeds

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has started off with a bang in his new role by addressing certain issues that have touched a chord with the masses. The most important thing now is to put these into motion.

SO FAR so good.

That is perhaps the most reasonable description of the first month of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's tenure as Prime Minister.

It may not say much and the suspicious types may think that this is not the politically correct way to talk about the Prime Minister. No offence or disrespect intended. What it means is that Abdullah has been saying and doing all the right things so far.

This is absolutely important because in politics, as in communications, saying the right thing is half the battle won.

Anything from 'work with me and not for me' to urging Cabinet Ministers to live moderately and pledging to fight corruption appears to have gone down well with the majority of the people. These are the things they like to hear.

As the former Barisan Nasional (BN) Member of Parliament for Muar, Dr Abdul Malik Munip, put it, they were down-to-earth. 'It shows his commitment to the ordinary people with dignified humility,' said Malik, adding: 'Perhaps, that's what they

now want.'

Still, the newspaper headlines are only the beginning. The more important thing is matching these words with deeds.

Being a seasoned politician and administrator, Abdullah is more than aware of the perils of unfulfilled expectations. It is all right to talk about the war on corruption, chiding the district offices for inefficiency and raiding the passport office to meet the disenchanted applicants.

It is recalled that in the early months of his tenure as Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam (now Tan Sri) raided district offices and issued stern warnings to civil servants to shape up or ship out.

IT'S WAR ... ON CORRUPTION THAT IS

ON the other hand, fulfilling expectations created by these headlines is quite another matter.

Hardly a week after his much-publicised surprise visit to the Kuala Lumpur passport

office, *The Star* newspaper headlined: 'Centre not a whole lot better after PM's visit'. Quoting a report in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* newspaper, the paper said the immigration staff at the Pusat Bandar Damansara passport office had not shown a marked improvement in efficiency a week after the Prime Minister's surprise visit.

A week is surely too short a time to judge the outcome of the Prime Minister's visit, but for the people dealing with the centre, one week is a long time when the Clients' Charter says that passport renewal takes three working days. If within this period they see no improvement in service, they may conclude that the visit has produced no results.

And Abdullah only knows too well the perils of offending civil servants. They may be servants but in reality they are the masters of our destiny.

A few days later, the same newspaper reported that a British citizen and his local 'runner' were charged in court for allegedly cheating the Road Transport Department of RM1.8 million in motor vehicle import duties.

On the same day, it reported that two senior Customs officers had been sacked and another demoted for alleged manipulation of tax assessment on imported luxury cars in the past six months. Seven others are being investigated.

The two cases may be unrelated, but do not gel well with the anti-corruption campaign when the perpetrators are charged in court and the manipulators are only given the sack. Maybe they will be arrested and charged later.

With the Prime Minister having declared war on corruption, which includes the abuse of power as one of the key items in his agenda, he has no choice but to use it as the main criterion for the selection of BN candidates in the coming general election.

There is a strong possibility that - depending on the definition of corruption by Abdullah - some existing incumbents might not pass the litmus test and would have to be excluded from the list.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

WITH so many things to be said and done - anything from preparing for the election to seeking the truth about allegations of the sale of honorific titles by 10 states - we should allow Abdullah peace of mind.

We should stop spending valuable time debating whether to continue referring to him fondly as 'Pak Lah' or to ban it now that he is Prime Minister. If Abdullah has no problems with it, why should we? He has been called that name for a very long time. Maybe we should avoid using it in a manner that suggests disrespect.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be 'Datuk Seri' to many people for a very long time. Even though he is today a Tun, many people will, on many occasions, still be referring to him as Datuk Seri.

In fact, when this scribe apologised to him for inadvertently addressing him as Datuk Seri instead of Tun, he looked amused. He was less concerned about his title than about wanting this scribe 'to think Asian' and about the many interesting books he is now reading - among them writings on Salahuddin Al-Ayubi (Saladin to the Europeans), Richard the Lion Heart and the history of Muslim Spain.

Abdullah has to treat the allegations of

the sale of honorific titles seriously as it affects the dignity of the monarchy. After undergoing two constitutional crises relating to the rulers, we can hardly afford a third one.

Yet, the Sultan, Raja and the *budak raja* (royal servants) are human beings like all of us. They too can make mistakes. That is why during the second crisis, Parliament amended the constitution to limit the immunity of the rulers to the performance of their official duties only.

It is true that Abdullah is a nice man but

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parties - from the *istana* (palace) at the top to the good-for-nothing layabout *kamjat* at the bottom - should take advantage of his friendly nature for personal gains.

Kudos to Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim for daring to take the bull by the horns in the Datukship issue. The media has been on it for years with little or no effect.

Of course, the media is not entirely credible in confronting the issue as it celebrates these awards as a means of harnessing advertising income. Many Datuks and Tan Sris are willing to spend a lot of money to tell the whole world that they are now Datuks and Tan Sris.

MALAYSIA, A MODEL ISLAMIC COUNTRY

THE Pan Malayan Islamic Party (Pas) has made several u-turns and negotiated some sharp corners since the 1969 days when its campaigners labelled every Umno member *kafir* (infidel) for cooperating with non-Muslims and promised to drive the Chinese and Indians to the sea if it came to power.

Pas has not come to power. The *kafir* Umno has introduced many Islamic programmes and brought peace and prosperity to the country.

Malaysia is today acknowledged as the most successful Islamic country in the world despite only about 60% of its population being Muslims.

While many Muslim nations and states

have failed miserably and their people live in fear and poverty, Malaysia has succeeded.

Millions of people around the region - both Muslims and non-Muslims alike - benefit from Malaysia's wealth and from its liberal employment policy.

If Umno's brand of nationalism is a form of *assabiyah* (tribalism), as labelled by Pas and, therefore, unIslamic, then how do we explain the prosperity of the non-Muslims and the presence of millions of foreign workers?

But it is labels like these that draw uninitiated Muslims to the party. Muslims, in particular the Malays, are so easily cowed by high-sounding slogans and jargons - especially if they are in Arabic - believing that they are Quranic.

Pas is not unaware of the success of the country under Umno's stewardship. On the contrary, it is the recognition of this fact that is forcing its leaders to desperately look for new slogans and jargons to discredit Umno.

Depending on with which strange bed-fellow it is sleeping, the party changes its stance to suit the occasion. With the now-defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46 in the 1990 general election, it was *perpaduan ummah* (the unity of the people), in 1995, it was *negara Islam* (the Islamic State) and in the last general election in 1999 it was *keadilan* (justice).

THE DESPERATION OF PAS

FOR the coming general election, the sales gimmick is the recently launched 53-page document entitled *Negara Islam*.

It is an old issue given a new twist with the objective of pacifying the opposing factions in the party and convincing non-Muslim voters that an Islamic state is good for them.

With the liberal non-*ulama* faction now gaining strength in the party, the sound bytes will keep improving. Members of this faction are as savvy as any spin-doctor in Umno and the BN.

An improved electoral performance is vital in keeping the party intact and avoiding a showdown between the conservatives (read *ulama*) and the highly ambitious liberals in the party.

Even among the *ulama*, the views differ. Party President Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, who is also the Menteri Besar of Terengganu, is more ideological and theocratic – akin to the Iranian system. The head of the religious council and the Kelantan Menteri Besar, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, meanwhile, is a traditionalist. He is typical of the old-time village *ulama* who are not averse to making ridiculous statements and cracking jokes.

The liberals, on the other hand, are hoping that the latest offerings will make the Islamic State agenda more attractive to the educated Muslims and allay the fear of the non-Muslims.

The olive branch the document purports to extend to the non-Muslims is purely tactical. It is intended to neutralise non-Muslim voters while keeping the hope of enticing the Chinese-based DAP back into the Barisan Alternatif alive.

With the Malay votes evenly split, splicing the non-Malay votes is crucial to Pas' victory.

The changing pattern of leadership of the party can be both a boon and a bane. With the liberals making decisive inroads into the leadership during the recent party election, the strain will sooner or later develop between them and the conservative *ulama*.

Pas, after all, was born out of the ideological struggle between the liberal and conservative *ulama* in Umno in the late 1940s. The conservative *ulama* who rejected the collaboration with the non-Muslims left to form Pas in 1951.

The *Negara Islam* document is also intended to cover up the failure of the party to create model Islamic states out of Kelantan and Terengganu.

Today, even families are being adversely affected as men are forced to leave the states to seek employment elsewhere. Drug addiction is widespread and poverty is on the rise.

If anything, Kelantan and Terengganu are examples of failed Islamic states. **mb**

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