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PM: Foundation has been laid

It's not quite over yet for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who tells BERNAMA that he has to look into a few important matters before he hands over power to Datuk Seri Najib Razak in March

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Q: How do you feel now that you have made your announcement? Do you feel relieved, maybe a tinge of regret?

A: I thank God for making it easy for me to decide. I have decided, I am happy with the decision and I feel good about it.

I recall that when I was elected in 2004, I set out in my manifesto what I thought the country would be and what the country needed to do to achieve Vision 2020. I recall all that.

After the vision was announced in 1990, implementation was good. Malaysia did well over the first 15 years. I was fully aware that in the second half of the journey (for Vision 2020), we would have challenging times.

I have said on many occasions that when you climb up, making the final push for the summit, like climbing Everest, the final assault is the most difficult part of the climb.

I think we have put in place a good foundation and, guided by the National Mission, I believe we can achieve our aim. I am confident that my successor will continue my work and do what it takes to get us there.

Q: Are you saying that regardless of you being there (as the prime minister) or not, you have laid a good foundation for Vision 2020?

A: Yes, I believe the time is right for a new generation of leaders to take over. What is important is that Umno and BN must be united in dealing with all the challenges we are facing.

Q: What went through your mind before you came to such a decision?

A: I must say this. After the election, there were people who said that I must go. Some people held me responsible for the results which nobody (in BN) liked, which shocked party members, particularly Umno.

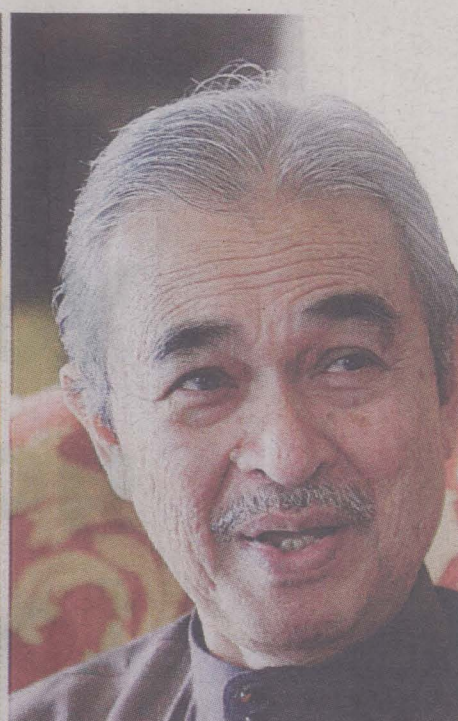
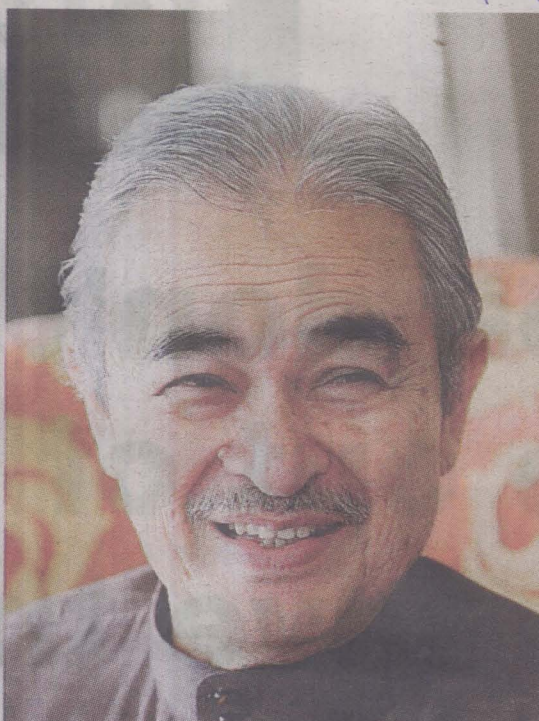
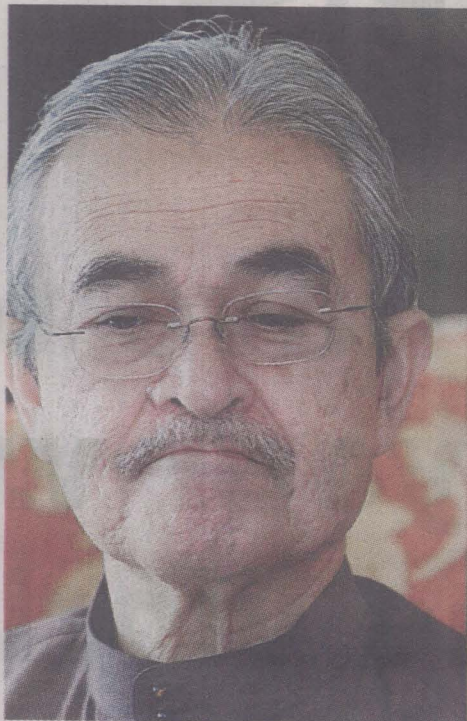
But there were also others who were rooting strongly for me, urging me to stay on to continue my work. And they had been coming to the house in groups, telling me that "you cannot leave, you have your mission, you have to complete your mission".

I listened to every side but, at the same time, I had to look at the real situation, into the future and finally I made up my mind that it was the right time to hand over the responsibilities.

Q: Did you inform the Yang di-Pertuan Agong?

A: No.

Q: Why not?



A: I don't think it is a necessary because it is purely a party matter. I'm still the prime minister. When it comes to handing over or appointing a successor to the prime minister, only then it is important to inform the king.

Q: You were described as being cheerful on the day of the announcement. How could you be so when announcing that you will eventually be leaving the limelight and the trappings of power?

A: As I told you, the decision do not trouble me. I do not regret the decision. I felt good about it and that was why I could be cheerful. What I'm doing is in the best interest of the country and the party. It will allow us to focus on the job at hand and I fully intend to utilise the months ahead to implement my agenda. Leaving the limelight and giving up power is not my main concern.

Q: Do you think that your departure will help party unity?

A: I hope my decision will be in the best interest of the country. At the same time, I want to focus on what I need to do. I believe the attitude and behaviour of party members will determine the future of the party — that is very important. If they put public interest before their own, Umno will be fine.

Q: Now that you have stated your intention to resign, some quarters have even clamoured for you to go now. Some have even told you not to say anything between now and March while they go on making statements even after they have left office. Your com-

ments, please.

A: I am well aware of what I want to do. I have planned my retirement, I have planned ahead on when I need to hand over and what to do. I am not staying on just to bask in the glory of being prime minister. I had decided to stay on because I have a mission. I must make good on the promises I have made, especially on the reforms. Remember, I was criticised for having promised something which the people liked and welcomed, and then they said that I did not deliver.

But I did not complete them in the first four years because I had concentrated on other things. But there is one thing that I would like to mention, that my election manifesto in 2004 was not only for the four years (lasting until 2008) when I am in power.

Q: So you saw that as laying the foundation for the future?

A: Yes, I am aware that I came in just after the first half of the implementation of Vision 2020. I came in towards the beginning of the second half of Vision 2020. So I still had three five-year development periods (to implement various programmes).

I thought I could choose the second half to implement what I wanted. However, there was unhappiness over what the people expected I should have done and things I had not done.

So when I announced the reform of the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Agency, there was very strong support. Some people now question why I hadn't announced these reforms before the last elec-

tions and said they would have supported them.

Anyway, it doesn't matter now. What happened has happened. Before I leave, I will make sure that I implement a few reforms and some economic programmes. I am still the prime minister, so I don't see why I should keep quiet. Maybe those who are asking me to keep quiet want to monopolise the spotlight for themselves.

Q: Will you miss the hustle and bustle of the highest office of the land?

A: Maybe, but I will know it when I retire. It will be someone else's time. I can safely say that I will not be trying to govern from the sidelines.

Q: You led BN to a landslide victory in 2004 and then suffered a reversal in 2008. Do you think the lack of support was because you did not deliver on your promises to reform?

A: That's what people say, and I believe what they say. Those were some of the serious complaints because the reforms that I promised moved a lot of people, judging from the comments in the newspapers after the 2004 elections.

Q: You felt that the government should have done more in terms of fulfilling the people's aspirations. Can you cite examples?

A: Again it was in the implementation aspect of the reforms. We didn't complete them. I have always wanted to institute these changes, but I wanted to do them gradually. But maybe people wanted me to move quick and

maybe that's why they expressed their disappointment.

In any case, I have stated that I want to deliver on these institutional reforms and also launch the social safety net which will cover 110,000 households.

Q: Do you think you were hasty in calling for polls when you didn't have time to get the BN machinery in order?

A: Well, the timing was carefully thought out. I wanted to get a renewed mandate because there were so many criticisms over so many things. So I thought that it would be good to get a new mandate. That was why I decided to have the election at a time when many people felt it was a bit too early.

I thought if I were to delay (the election), it would be risky. Look at what happened after the general election. The price of oil went up and food prices as well. And with other problems cropping up, I thought it would be more difficult for us than what we got in the election, where we had 58 seats more than the opposition.

If we had delayed the polls, it could have been worse, because we would have to deal with problems like higher oil prices, inflation and the global economic turmoil that we are experiencing now.

In many developed countries, having a 58-seat majority would have been described as a landslide victory. I have met many of my (foreign) colleagues and they asked me what all the noise was about in Malaysia.

I told them I did not get a two-third majority and they said: "What? We never got two-thirds."