

DATE: 12/10/2008

PM: Decision in best interest of the country

NST-12/10/2008

PUTRAJAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he does not regret his decision to expedite the handing over of the reins of power to his successor, Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"The decision does not trouble me. A decision had to be made and I considered it very carefully," he said in an interview at his official residence at Seri Perdana.

"I thank God for making it easy for me to decide. I think what I'm doing is in the best interest of the country and the party."

Having made the decision, it would "allow us to focus on the job at hand", he said in reference to the incessant politicking since the March 8 general election and the need to focus on fulfilling the aspirations of the people.

"I intend to use the months ahead to implement my agenda. Leaving the limelight and giving up power is not my main concern."

On what went through his mind before he made his decision, he said: "After the elections, 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 people, particularly Umno."

"But there were also others who were strongly for me, urging me to stay on to continue my work."

"And they had been coming to my 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. I made up my mind that it was the right time to hand over responsibilities."

Abdullah said the government had put in place a good foundation and, guided by the National Mission, the country could achieve its Vision 2020 aim.

"I am confident that my successor will continue my work and do

what it takes to get us there," he said, adding that regardless of whether he was there as prime minister, a good foundation had been laid for other leaders.

"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."

"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."

On demands by some quarters for him to leave now or not to say anything between now and the time he handed over power, he said he was aware of what he wanted to do.

"I have decided to stay on because I have a mission. I must make good on the promises I made, especially on the reforms."

"When I announced the beginning of the reform of the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Agency, there was strong support."

"Some people now question why I hadn't announced these reforms before the last elections and said they would have supported them."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter now as what happened has happened. I will make sure that I implement a few reforms and some economic programmes."

Abdullah said he was still the prime minister and did not see why he should keep quiet.

"Maybe those who are asking me to keep quiet want to monopolise the spotlight themselves."

Asked whether a lack of support led to the poor results in this year's general election, he said:

"Those were some of the serious complaints because the reform promise moved a lot of people, judging from the comments in newspapers after the 2004 elections."

He said the government had faltered in implementing several programmes.

"I have always wanted to institute these changes, but I wanted to do them gradually."

"But, maybe, people wanted me to move quicker and 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."

Asked whether he would have done it differently in terms of timing and other issues if he had another chance to handle the 12th general election, he said the timing was carefully thought.

Abdullah said he had wanted a fresh mandate because there were so many criticisms over many issues.

"So I thought that it would be good to get a new mandate. That was why I decided to have the elections at a time when many people felt it would be too early."

"But I thought that if I were to delay, it may be a risk. Look at what happened after the general election, when the price of oil went up, food prices as well."

"I thought it would be more difficult for us to have the kind of results that we got where we had 58 seats more than the opposition."

He said that in many developed countries, having 58 seats more would have been described as a landslide victory.

He said he had met many of his foreign colleagues who asked him what the big noise in Malaysia was about. "I told them I did not get a two-thirds majority and they said, 'What? We never got two-thirds'."

On whether his stance on giving greater leeway to freedom and openness had affected him politically, he said people had their own views.

"But let's be realistic. In this era, where people have access to information through so many dif-

ferent sources, the logic of this development is that you have to be able to embrace openness."

"You don't muzzle the press. If certain newspapers were to have heavy censorship on one particular subject, people can still have access to information through other sources."

"A new generation of well-educated, young and better informed people has emerged."

Abdullah said the problem in the past was that the government had not been able to explain its policies to deal with the situation more effectively.

"It is a new situation for us, even for me. After we had allowed this freedom for openness, we had to cope with it."

"The people reacted to it in the most enthusiastic way. They think that freedom means that they can say anything that they want. Like what is happening in the web blogs."

"The number or percentage of those who tend to abuse it or can abuse it is big enough to cause a lot of concern and problems."

As a result, he said, the country still needed laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Sedition Act and Official Secrets Act as checks and balances.

"But, of course, in enforcing the acts, we have to be wise. They are to curb things we ought not to do."

Abdullah said he believed that it was unacceptable to have complete freedom.

"We cannot allow people to spread lies and to slander freely."

"We have bodies like Pemudah, where criticism of government machinery is expressed frankly to senior civil servants. And these criticisms are acted upon."

Abdullah said he believed that the government ought to know how to handle this openness and freedom as it was a global phenomenon.

"The new communication technology has given us this freedom to disseminate and freedom to accept." — Bernama