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THE STAR - 12/10/2008 *says...*

## Pak Lah can still salvage his legacy

SO much to do, so little time. There's a long list of things that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi wants to do before stepping down as Prime Minister in March. And it looks like a tall order.

He has pledged to reform the judiciary, beef up the fight against corruption, make enforcement agencies more accountable, widen the country's social safety net and improve inter-racial, inter-religious ties.

Sneering critics have been quick to deride the targets as unachievable, noting the unfulfilled promises of the 2004 general election which he won with the biggest mandate ever.

The discontent festered for four years, leading to an opposite swing of support and resultant tectonic political shift in the March 8 polls.

Abdullah, who has experienced both the zenith and nadir points of popularity, has had a tumultuous time since then, fending off attacks from the Opposition and from within his own party.

Those who had been accusing him of incompetence and indecisiveness expect an ignominious end to his political career. But he can still prove that he is no lame duck.

Six months may be a blink of an eye but it is a window of opportunity to salvage his stalled legacy as a political reformer. Time, after all, can stay long enough for anyone who wants to use it.

Abdullah has already started the ball rolling on inter-religious relations by seeking solutions to long-standing rancorous issues - the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam through marriage, problems faced by spouses who do not convert and the bitter tussles over burial rites.

It has taken some time for him to acknowledge it publicly, but such issues should indeed be tackled through rational discussions, focusing on the points that unite rather than divide the people.

Abdullah's aims for a Judicial Appointments Commission for an open, merit-based judiciary and an Anti-Corruption Commission modelled on Hong Kong's much-feared ICAC are laudable.

The Special Complaints Commission to ensure integrity of enforcement agencies, however, falls short of the original recommendations for an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission.

Shortcomings aside, Abdullah should be given the opportunity to get the respective Bills tabled, debated and passed in Parliament with amendments if needed, as they would result in better governance and democracy.

And it will all have to be done in double quick time.