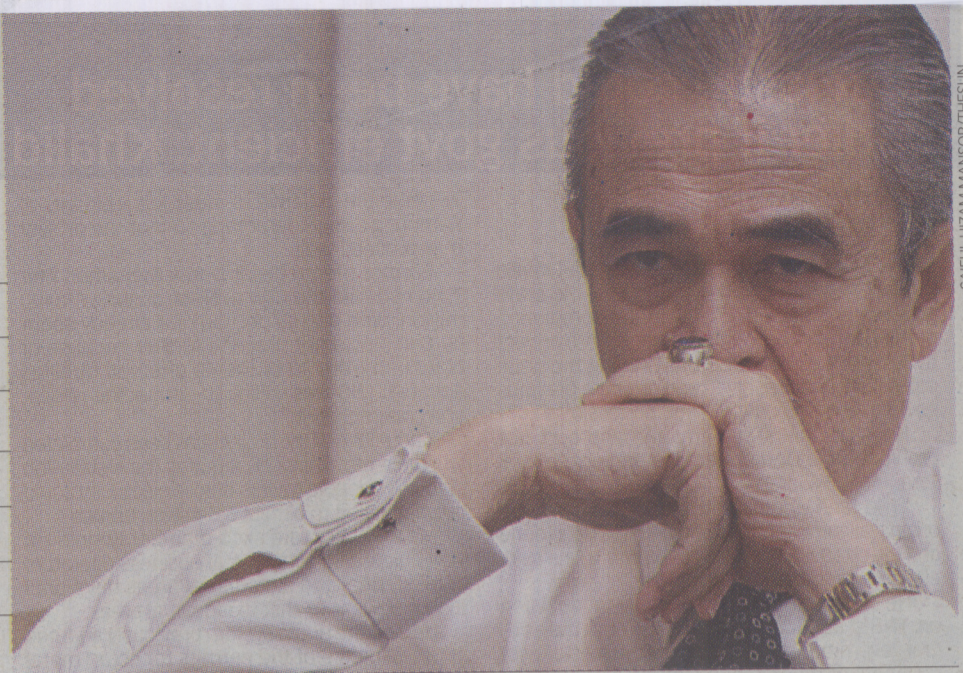


Man on a mission

PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI IS FOCUSED ON REFORMS AS PART AND PARCEL OF HIS EXIT PLAN. HE SPEAKS TO **R. NADESWARAN** AND **TERENCE FERNANDEZ** ON THE CHANGES HE ASPIRES TO ACHIEVE BEFORE HE LEAVES IN MARCH, AS WELL AS THE OBSTACLES IN HIS PATH, AND HOPES MALAYSIANS CAN SET THEIR DIFFERENCES ASIDE AND THINK ABOUT WHAT'S BEST FOR THE NATION.

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SAIFUL HIZAM MANSOR/THE SUN

theSun: Datuk Seri, you have certain unfinished business which you are trying to settle before you leave office in March. Please tell us what your priorities are.

Abdullah: I'll come straight to the point. I want to focus on key reforms. I admit that these are reforms which I should have done a long time ago; but what to do? That's a long story ... anyway, here's what I want to deal with - corruption, judicial appointments commission and the special complaints commission (on enforcement agencies). These are the three important areas which I want to focus on because if we don't address them, this nation will be in trouble.

Let's start with corruption. This has to do with integrity. One of the programmes I had initiated was the National Integrity Institute. This is one initiative, where you try to imbue quality and the credibility in the individual civil servant.

But how does this translate

into having a civil service with integrity?

There are two ways to fight corruption - curative and preventive. If you just concentrate on curative, every time you get rid of one person, another fellow will come in. There will be no end. So you must concentrate on preventive. Preventive must go on as then it will deal with the curative aspect. You talk about corruption, it is corrosive, and it will affect our competitiveness, affect people's belief in us and also affect people's support for us.

If they don't support us because they believe we have no integrity, and corruption is rife, *semua habis!*

But corruption is so widespread. How are you going to tackle something that has been festering for years in the three-four months that you have left?

It is not easy, I know. Some would say almost impossible. Corruption is not confined to the government service, even the private sector ...

everyone is tainted with some kind of perception of being involved in corruption.

But I assure you that as soon as the MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) Bill is tabled in Parliament, (the first reading is on Dec 10) I will see Datuk Abu Kassim Mohamed (ACA deputy director-general) or Datuk Seri Ahmad Said Hamdan (ACA director-general) (who have been tasked with drafting the Bill). They are good men! Very honest. Both of them have promised that they will deliver and they have delivered.

Of course, Parliament is where it will be reviewed and discussed, so I hope everyone will look beyond partisan lines and vote for what is best for the rakyat.

We don't think you should worry about this. How would Lim Kit Siang, Hadi Awang and Anwar Ibrahim explain to their constituents that they had failed or refused to support something that is good for the rakyat?

This is why I want all of us - from both sides of the divide - to think about what's in the best interest of the people. Just because you are Opposition you vote against the Bill, this is not the way. But I am confident that everyone, my Barisan Nasional friends and my Opposition friends included, will support it. This is going to change how the ACA works. Mind you,

you will see a different kind of ACA. One with clout and one that responds and is answerable to the rakyat.

Anyone who opposes the Bill would have something to hide - especially, if those opposed are from the ruling coalition.

Well, I suppose that would be the public perception.

What about the judicial reforms?

Judicial appointments are equally important. People must believe that the judiciary is a judiciary of integrity. If people have confidence in the judiciary then we won't have to worry as we have someone who will look after our rights, someone who will defend us, someone we can appeal to.

And in my plan I want to establish a panel that will be responsible for the appointment of judges. That's why these three are important as they are interlinked - judiciary, ACA and complaints commission. These pillars are very, very important.

There was opposition to the composition of the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC). How did you manage to meet halfway with critics; and what guarantees are there that the JAC will perform the functions they are set out to do

independently?

Firstly, I would not call it 'opposition', but differing opinions. This entity is very important to many stakeholders and as such, all groups have their opinions on what would be the best composition for the Commission. My task is to come to a workable compromise, after much listening and discussion with all major groups.

All groups come with certain assumptions about what will work, based on their research as well as their biases. This is normal - all groups have certain pre-conceptions but we all meet halfway when we discuss and see that the Commission will meet its core function, which is to propose the best names for judicial appointments based on clear criteria.

The JAC's independence will be seen from the conduct of its members. In terms of procedure, there will be no interference from the Executive in the nominations of the judicial candidates. The members of the Commission will meet among themselves and decide on names based on secret ballot voting. In fact, we need to safeguard against interference or inappropriate pressure from all parties, not just the Executive. But I think this will be limited because there is a clear merit-based criteria as well as the character of the members of the Commission.

But how does one explain the choice of Tan Sri Zaki Azmi as chief justice? You have a former Umno legal adviser who leaped-frogged to the highest judicial position in the country.

Yes, but he was Umno legal adviser long before he was appointed (to the Bench). Anyone can engage him as a lawyer, but

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I know him as a man of integrity. He doesn't mess up his work and has done a good job, so if he is assigned to another job, I know he will do it right.

He has already said that he won't have anything to do with Umno. And he is ordering a lot of changes. He is a good man who provides leadership.

Was he your only choice?

Of course, I had a few people in my mind. I won't discuss this of course, but he was the best candidate. The critics will make noise if he rules against them. But if he rules in their favour, he is a good judge, right? But anyway, the judicial appointments committee will go through the names and see who will be on the Bench, and as long as we have good people on the panel, we will have good people on the Bench.

Datuk Seri when you speak of the reforms to these three pillars of justice, you must also address the public's perception of the Attorney General (A-G)'s Chambers. As it stands, the A-G's Chambers is viewed as the government's legal adviser, so when it comes to cases that involve politicians and government personalities, there is the perception that the A-G is biased.

These concerns will be addressed through the reforms to the judiciary and the ACA that