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FIRST 100 DAYS OF ABDULLAH'S SECOND TERM

Firmer resolve after trial by fire

By Ooi Kee Beng

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DATUK SERI Abdullah Badawi is still the prime minister of Malaysia. That is the biggest surprise 100 days after the March 8 general election.

From being the country's most popular leader after his landslide victory in the 2004 general election, he is now its least accepted. Still, he has managed to stay in office despite the enormous pressure on him to step down.

Calls for his resignation were loudest from within his own party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Demands for a post-mortem to determine what went wrong for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition came from the likes of Umno veteran Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who has vowed to challenge Mr Abdullah for the party presidency.

The Prime Minister has thus far refused a party-wide review of the debacle.

More dramatically, his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a thorn in his flesh since mid-2006, quit Umno, although the move seems to have backfired so far. Its effect, too, on party and popular opinion, has been minimal.

Even his son, Mukhriz, a second-rank leader in Umno Youth, has not followed his father's lead. Mr Abdullah survived that round, though he was forced to name Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak as his successor.

But most hurtful to the Prime Minister were the resignation calls from close political associates such as Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. The man promoted by Mr Abdullah to minister of international trade and industry after the election insisted the leader set a schedule for his retirement.

Mr Muhyiddin is supported by Datuk Seri Rais Yatim, whom the Prime Minister promoted from minister of culture, arts and heritage to foreign minister. Obviously, there are no permanent allies within Umno.

But to the Prime Minister's credit, his administration has continued to perform. He slashed unsustainable fuel subsidies, causing petrol prices to rise by 41 per cent recently. It was a gutsy move, though deeply unpopular.

Five days later, Mr Abdullah announced plans to cut government spending in a bid to soothe public unhappiness.

The sequence of events gives credence to suspicions that the government is having difficulties managing political pressure. If it had announced the spending cuts before the subsidy cuts, it might have dampened the outrage the latter caused.

The uncertainty over the subsidy cut before the final decision was made on June 4 did not help. Ministers made conflicting remarks, suggesting the government was torn internally over the issue.

That, in itself, is not surprising. But it does suggest a leader not in full command.

That he went ahead with the tough decision shows a certain determination.

Perhaps his greatest victory since the polls has been his success in countering Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's influence. The opposition leader has been trying to persuade enough BN MPs to cross over to the Pakatan Rakyat so he can form a government.

At least 30 such defections are needed, and it was assumed most would come from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. But Mr Abdullah has managed thus far to prevent this exodus.

Given how little success Mr Anwar has had, it must be said the Prime Minister and his men have managed to contain the shock that March 8 administered to the system.

His choice of Cabinet ministers was both criticised and commended. He left out a few 'tainted' individuals, but kept others. He has also shown intent over judicial reform, and aims to raise the standing of the much-disgraced judiciary.

His compromises and manoeuvres seem to have worked. His chief goal - staying on in power - no longer seems as vain as it did immediately after March 8.

And the decision to postpone Umno's polls to late December has given him enough time to rally his forces and secure his defences. Mr Abdullah is not as hapless a politician as his critics, including Dr Mahathir, like to believe.

All in all, 100 days after March 8, Malaysian politics seems more stable than many thought possible. The defeated parties within BN accepted their fate, and the opposition parties that won control of five states settled into their new roles fairly well.

The lesson that voters taught politicians - that ultimately it is they who decide - seems to have sunk in.

That lesson should have been learnt earlier, before public sentiment degenerated to the extent that it did. Unfortunately, a possible change in Malaysian politics - away from its authoritarian race-based ideology - came late.

As a result, the medicine that now needs to be swallowed will inevitably taste bitter. Too many powerful groups have come to acquire too much interest in maintaining the status quo.

Whether Mr Abdullah survives or not will, in the end, depend on how well he has learnt his lesson. He must now dare to do with a weak mandate what he did not dare do with a strong one.

Should he rise to the challenge - as he seems to have in the first 100 days of his second term - and get on with the people's business sufficiently well, he might still be able to convert a weak hand into a stronger one.

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