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UMNO'S FRUITLESS SOUL SEARCHING

By Ooi Kee Beng

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MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been having a hard time since the March 8 general elections, when the drastic fall in his popularity among voters was revealed for the world to see.

Not only did the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), lose many of its seats to the opposition, several of its major component parties were almost wiped out when voters chose to desert them. His own party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), being the dominant force within the coalition, went through a period of serious soul-searching, while some of its allies blamed the party leaders for their loss.

Six months on, it seems the soul-searching has not led to any breakthroughs. BN has continued to make blunders that have encouraged the opposition under former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to unseat the government.

The Government's latest blunder was to resort to the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain popular blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, Selangor assemblywoman Teresa Kok and a young female journalist Tan Hoon Cheng. At the same time, three newspapers were asked to give reasons why they should not be closed down.

After protests from key politicians, Ms Tan — whose only "crime" was to write a corroborated 140-word report about Umno politician Ahmad Ismail making a public statement that non-Malays were "squatters" in the country — was released after 18 hours in detention.

Among the millions of Malaysians shocked and disgusted by the Government's move to use the ISA — and by Home Affairs Minister Syed Hamid Albar's rationalisation that Ms Tan was locked away for her own safety — was de facto Law Minister Zaid Ibrahim. Mr Zaid resigned in disgust, but Mr Abdullah did not accept the resignation, instead advising

him to take two weeks' leave to re-consider his decision, the News Straits Times reported.

Indeed, one of the few right moves that Mr Abdullah had made since the BN's debacle on March 8 was to put Mr Zaid in charge of the judiciary in the Prime Minister's Department.

This was to satisfy pre-election calls for the judiciary to be reformed. Mr Zaid's appointment was the highlight of the Cabinet that Mr Abdullah formed to convince voters that he had, as he put it, "learned his lesson".

With Mr Zaid now poised to leave the Government under such distressing circumstances, Mr Abdullah's reputation is taking a beating at a time when he can least afford it. What critics see are, first, that Mr Abdullah has not learned his lesson; second, that he is not capable of learning that lesson; and third, that the country cannot afford to allow him to remain in ignorant bliss for another two years.

In fact, it looks as if his closest supporters are arriving at the conclusion that even the party cannot afford to give him the time.

Mr Anwar's Pakatan Rakyat coalition is now banging at the door and Umno has not been able to come up with any better strategy than to lock up popular individuals and to send backbenchers to Taiwan to pre-empt them from defecting.

The double standards employed by the Government (or at least condoned by its top leaders) are too striking to be ignored.

While Umno's Ahmad Ismail was merely suspended from the party for three months for making racially-provocative remarks, Ms Kok, who has denied any role in a controversy concerning mosque loudspeakers, is detained without trial. While the journalist who reported Mr Ahmad's provocative statement was intimidated through the ISA, the Umno-owned Utusan Melayu, which claimed Ms Kok's involvement in the mosque issue, goes unpunished.

Within Umno, the resignation of Mr Zaid strengthens the hand of challengers to the party presidency, such as Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Should things start going his way, the whole power structure within Umno would be threatened.

But Mr Razaleigh's biggest weakness is that he does not hold any position of power in the government at the moment. In the present situation, one must count on actors in the centre of power doing their best to buttress the present power structure as best as they can.

While Home Affairs Minister Syed Hamid takes the flak for the ISA debacle,

International Trade and Industry Minister Muhyiddin Yassin is publicly voicing doubts about Mr Abdullah's plans to retire in two years' time.

More surprisingly, Mr Najib Abdul Razak, who has hitherto been playing the loyal deputy to the Prime Minister, has started changing his stance.

Aside from realising their own ambitions, such moves by those who had been Mr Abdullah's closest supporters seemed aimed at minimising the damage to the power pyramid that had been crumbling over the last six months.

December, when the party holds its elections, may be too far away. The Government might not survive that long.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His latest book is *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah*.