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Abdullah's 4th year: Less hope, more sympathy

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GOING into his fourth year as Malaysia's premier, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's luck continues to hold out. In fact, it seems to get better and better.

The "doses of venom" that his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammed unleashed against him seem to have backfired; bringing the Prime Minister much needed general sympathy, especially from Malay leaders, and significantly from outside UMNO as well as from within.

Mahathir's apparent disregard for Malay cultural sensibilities is legendary. This was first made obvious in 1969 when he openly attacked the first premier, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and was expelled from the party as a result.

The latest disregard came when he decided to reveal details of his one-to-one meeting with his successor on October 22, 2006, held just two days before the end of the fasting month. The timing of the meeting had given Malays hope that reconciliation between their two most respected leaders was on the cards.

Such hope turned out to be badly misplaced, and one wonders if Mahathir can ever be forgiven for this utter lack of good judgment.

Nonetheless, the Mahathir factor has indelibly wedged itself in any assessment of the successes and failures of the Badawi administration. Thanks to Mahathir's Hari Raya faux pas, Abdullah Badawi may well have weathered the worst of the former premier's assaults and successfully crossed the Rubicon in the process.

Over the past year, support for Datuk Seri Abdullah wavered at the grassroots, even as it grew at the top. He was seen to be lacking in ideas and the business ventures of

his son Kamaluddin and his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin attracted criticism that he could not defend satisfactorily.

The reduction in government subsidies that led to a rise in fuel prices in February and electricity rates in May ended with demonstrations on the streets of Kuala Lumpur.

The Prime Minister's delay in carrying out reforms within the police force began to be seen as symptom either of a lack of will or a lack of ability. A series of reshuffles among the top brass within the police force probably a compromise between the service and the government suggested that Abdullah would not induct the police watchdog body that his own commission had recommended. Furthermore, the powerful UMNO Youth publicly announced its stand in February against such an institution.

Tension had also been mounting on the inter-religious front. A series of seminars organised by non-Muslim bodies to discuss Article 11, which guarantees Malaysians freedom of worship, were harassed by illegal gatherings of Muslim groups. Instead of enforcing the law and guaranteeing the right of those already granted permission to hold these seminars, the Abdullah regime instructed that they be cancelled, thus giving in to the illegal demonstrators.

The Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) came under fire in October after one of its reports handed to the government in February as advice for the Ninth Malaysia Plan attracted public attention. The study found that bumiputeras owned 45 per cent of corporate equity, and not around 19 per cent, as the government had claimed since 1990 to justify continued affirmative action.

Under pressure from many Malay quarters, the president of the think-tank Asli, which controls CPPS, Datuk Mirzan, incidentally the eldest son of Mahathir, withdrew the report as 'faulty'. This caused CPPS chief, the renowned former World Bank economist Lim Teck Ghee, to resign in protest.

This incident further dampened public hope for institutional reforms during Abdullah's term. There was widespread concern that religious and academic freedom was not being respected. On top of that came accusations that the mainstream newspapers, largely owned by ruling parties, were becoming more centrally controlled.

Calls for a review of the judicial crisis of 1988 many consider to be the beginning of the end for what had hitherto been perceived as an independent judiciary, were also turned down by Abdullah's administration.

The decision not to repeal any draconian legislature put into place during the Mahathir years detracts further from the hope that the government is committed to institutional reform.

For all these public grievances however, Abdullah's administration has been earning plaudits for getting certain things right.

The Cabinet reshuffle that Abdullah carried out in February, though lacking in radical change, succeeded in shoring up support for him among UMNO's leaders. It ended the uncertainty that had plagued the government for many months.

The Prime Minister's decision to scrap the Johor-Singapore bridge project on April 12 was met with great relief in most segments of Malaysian society. The Cabinet backed Abdullah fully, which must have shocked Mahathir. This necessarily made Mahathir's crash-through-or-crash style of politics that had led to the impasse between the two countries look worse than ever.

In concert, the Ninth Malaysia Plan has taken on a political dimension, possibly in response to Mahathir's claims that lower government spending was hurting the Malays, especially in the construction sector where government contracts are critical.

A staggering amount of investment is being earmarked for Southern Johor and Penang. Separately, huge investments in agriculture are also planned.

The decision to postpone UMNO elections due to have been held next year frees the administration from much infighting, limits Mahathir's possibilities to spin intrigue against the government, and potentially secures Khairy Jamaluddin's path to a parliamentary seat.

When the pluses and the minuses are considered, Abdullah Badawi seems to land on the right side. Mahathir's attacks have generated streams of sympathy for Abdullah at a time when doubts were established about the administration's sagging ambitions and lack of vision.

Paradoxically, in assessing Abdullah's work over the last year, Mahathir's attacks have helped Abdullah more than the former is able to admit.

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