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A prime failure to inspire the people

By Ooi Kee Beng

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AS MANY have noted, some with envy and some in exasperation, Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is a blessed man.

Perched on top of the pyramid of power, buoyed by a dominant party of loyalists known more for their blind support than for individual boldness, propped up by a coalition of small and obedient parties, snapped at by opposition parties still weak from defeats in the 2004 elections and in the by-elections since, Prime Minister Abdullah has been able to govern the country with relative ease.

Also, record-high oil prices have been a great help in blanketing weaknesses in the economy. Malaysia is still a net exporter of petroleum products, and lucratively so.

Datuk Seri Abdullah has been able to travel widely and often, and has not had to suffer any crippling crisis so far. He has also been able to continue expounding his concept of Islam Hadhari, despite the vagueness of this 'ideology'.

Most surprisingly, even the jagged eloquence of former premier Mahathir Mohamad has failed to dent Datuk Seri Abdullah's disarming wall of apparent inaction.

However, as the Premier's fourth year in power comes to an end, pressure is mounting on him to show decisiveness in his leadership. Discontent has been brewing in various segments of society over what is seen as a serious lack of self-criticism on the part of the administration.

One main source of unrest, especially among non-Malays, has to do with the absence of a sense of progress in national integration and unity. The perceived status quo – where a coalition of race-based parties stays in full control, partiality towards Islamisation is plain, race-based affirmative action continues unabated, corruption still spreads and rule of law is not paramount – was tolerated in the 1990s because of the belief that it was all just a passing phase.

Notions such as ‘Vision 2020’, ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ and ‘Melayu Baru’ used to play a vital role in sustaining the belief that Malaysia was on the go, and was slowly but inevitably leaving race fixation and poverty behind.

Prime Minister Abdullah’s ‘Work with Me’ and ‘Islam Hadhari’ slogans have not had any impact that comes close to Tun Dr Mahathir’s inspirations on that score.

That is where the Abdullah administration falls short. The feel-good sentiment among Malaysians in the early 1990s – that every day was a step in a process leading inexorably towards the creation of a country they could be proud of – is gone. Datuk Seri Abdullah’s reticence has not calmed the masses, which have become more restive instead.

OF WHIMS AND FANCIES

One lasting, and perhaps unintended, effect of Prime Minister Abdullah's style of reticent leadership is the space ministers and top Umno members enjoy and make use of to exaggerate the image of their power and position. This leaves the impression in the public eye that government policies lack a core conviction and a definite direction, but are instead being left to the whims of men with limited talent and extended ambitions.

Meanwhile, the judiciary has been rocked by scandals to the extent that 2,000 lawyers recently marched to the Prime Minister’s Office calling for reforms. The protest was triggered by a videotape released by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

This tape, probably shot in 2002, shows a senior lawyer supposedly discussing over his cellphone the fixing of judges’ appointments.

Worries about where Malaysia is heading have also been articulated by royals such as Perak’s Crown Prince Raja Nazrin Shah and Selangor’s Sultan Idris Shah.

What was more momentous was that the Conference of Rulers recently acted out of character by rejecting a government suggestion to promote a certain judge. The government gave in on that occasion.

Another significant show of impatience, but perhaps one that Datuk Seri Abdullah can more easily ignore, comes from within the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) camp itself.

The annual meeting of Gerakan (Parti Rakyat Gerakan Malaysia), the party ruling Chinese-majority Penang (Premier Abdullah’s home state), earlier this month saw several surprises. First, the head of its youth branch, Mr Mah Siew Kong, spoke on the issue of graft and threw a challenge to Umno, the dominant party within BN, when he asked that all 14 coalition member-parties be merged into one.

The practicalities involved in such a process are daunting indeed, not to mention the absence of a will among coalition leaders to move in a direction that would threaten many entrenched privileges. Nevertheless, the mere mention of such a subject sent ripples through the political sea.

Second, the head of Gerakan’s women’s branch, Ms Tan Lian Hoe, called for the government to ‘allow for a proper and free platform for the people to air their grievances, however sensitive the issues might be’.

In his speech to Gerakan delegates the following day, Prime Minister Abdullah seemed to accept Ms Tan's point, and cautioned political leaders not to sink into a state of denial. He further surprised the nation by saying: "Tell me the truth even if it is painful. The Prime Minister must have the courage and readiness to listen to the worst about the country or himself."

Gerakan chief Koh Tsu Koon continued the string of surprises by calling for a Royal Commission to investigate the controversial and damning videotape that the opposition had made available to the press. The government had earlier vehemently refused to form such a commission.

Gerakan seemed to be testing the present limits of the role that it had always said it would play within BN, but which it had not been doing for a long while, which is to be the opposition within the government. Perhaps rumours that the general election is around the corner inspired these speeches.

Given survey findings that non-Malay voters are showing more willingness to vote for the opposition, Premier Abdullah has to play wisely the one ace he still has up his sleeve – the prerogative to call elections at a time of his choosing - before July 2009.

The signs are clearly on the wall. In fact, the signs are also on the streets.

Cuepacs and the Malaysian Trades Union Congress have been organising huge protests against rising consumer prices and for minimum wage legislation, so far with no visible gain. Rising consumer prices and the fear of further increases in the year to come have heightened worries over bread-and-butter issues, giving more legitimacy to criticisms about governance.

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Public confidence in the Premier is falling fast. One can only hope that this fact is not being kept from him.

In order not to lose too much of what was gained at the ballot box in 2004 – and the signs are that he is definitely losing support – Prime Minister Abdullah has to put up a real fight to increase public trust in his abilities before he even calls for elections.

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