

Public Administration in Malaysia: Reformation under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

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Abstract

Public Administration of Malaysia is an essential link between citizens and governments. Whenever there is a change in the leadership of the government the people want government to meets their needs. The people want effective and efficient public administration, including public sector management, promote and strengthen democracy and good governance. Thus, when Tun Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi who is fondly called as Pak Lah took over as Prime Minister on 1st November 2003 following 22 years of Tun Dr Mahathir's leadership, the cry from the public was the same as ever. Administration is Abdullah forte. With more than 30 years' experience in public administration, Abdullah introduced a series of bold reforms during his term a Prime Minister. Evidently, many new policies and programs were initiated to reform Malaysia into a more productive and competitive nation. He also declared outright war on corruption; patronage and abuse of trust and improved the public governance to serve the people. In his managerial reform, he demanded more civic virtue, ethic, and transparent governance. Hence, the consequences of the reformation by Abdullah were studied in the case.

Keywords: Public Administration, Reformation, Leadership

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Introduction

Since independent in 1957, Malaysia has been under the wings of six Prime Ministers, each having their own value and authority desirable to manage the public bureaucracy. On 31 October 2003, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is fondly called as Pak Lah took over as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia. His appointment played a significant role in Malaysia political history following the stepping down of his predecessor Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the modern Malaysia's founding father who helmed the government for 22 years. The Prime Minister is the highest rung of leadership in the country's administrative system, chairs in policy making and also responsible for monitoring the implementation of the government programme. Public administration plays a vital role in the development of Malaysia and is still very crucial for the future of this country. When there is a change in the leadership of the country, people wants to see an efficient and effective public administration with new ideas and policies that will benefit the people of Malaysia. Indeed, when Abdullah took over the Prime Minister, he came up with a slogan "Combat the Corruption Menace" which enabled him to win handsomely in the 2004 general elections, the best in the Malaysia electoral history.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Abdullah started his career as a civil servant after obtaining his Bachelors in Islamic studies in 1964 as assistant secretary of Public Service Department and has vast experience and knowledge needed by the public and what should be done. His differing background from the previous main leaders had brought a new awakening in the nation administrative. As soon as Abdullah succeeded the Prime Minister in 2004, some of his promises were to have sense of fair-play regardless of religion, ethnicity or gender. Abdullah believe "the time for championing parochial interests is over. Issues must be addressed on the basic interest of the nation and the Malaysian people as a whole" (New Straits Times, 9th November 2007). These showed that he understands his position as leader for all Malaysians despite being the President of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

Throughout his five years role in administration, Abdullah was recognized with the image of *Mr. Clean* and *Mr. Nice Guy*, and most Malaysian believed that he would have reputation for a clean government.

Even the opposition leaders acknowledge this. For instance, Dr. Sanusi Osman the Vice President of Parti Keadilan (now known as Parti Keadilan Rakyat) stated that Abdullah is a different person from his predecessor Mahathir. Abdullah is more subtle and as a diplomatic leader has actually brought a new awakening to the public administration before his leadership duties taken over by his Deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak as the next Prime Minister in 2009.

Bureaucracy under Abdullah

In 2004 general election, the Barisan Nasional coalition under Abdullah, secured a rather large majority, which had not been surpassed until today. As a leader of the country's administrative system, Abdullah promised to have a better public administration (The Star, November 2003). He reminded the civil servants to enhance their ability in providing good quality administrative and management services. "This means that man, machine and procedures must be improved at all times," he said at the Finance Ministry's monthly assembly which also marked his first day in office as the new finance minister (Utusan Malaysia, 11th November 2003). According to Abdullah, the changes made in his rudiments of the government should base on the rise in the demands of the middle class in order to be more open to changes, because "the people were directly affected by services provided, they would either happy or terribly angry with the way the government was run" (The Star, 5th August 2008). This is to ensure that the government is ready to serve and to take the necessary measurement to ensure better services to the public.

In spite of that, bureaucracy is always a problem for a political leader with the title of Prime Minister, especially in Malaysia. Red tape in the administration had been recognized as a hurdle and must be tackled; however the reformation done so far is not enough (The Star, 6th August 2008). The sound of cries about the attitude of government department staff is getting louder and louder. In business, many small and medium enterprises are facing delays in the approval of their loan applications. In fact, Abdullah who is also known as the Finance Minister acknowledge the presence of red tape and he stressed that time has to come to change the slow and multi layered processes of starting a business in Malaysia (New Straight Times, 12th January 2007). Abdullah stressed that each government department should look into ways to reduce the

number of bureaucratic steps. He compared Malaysia with Singapore where to start a business in Malaysia requires nine procedures whereas Singapore only six, while in Australia, there were only two steps. So, Abdullah said it was necessary to cut bureaucracy and streamline or reduce laws and approval requirements. People want a fast track public administration which not only identifies but also takes proactive process to provide a better and efficient service.

In accordance, several approaches have been introduced to increase and upgraded the performance and service system. For instance, the registration of new businesses can be done within an hour and no longer than three days as before; licenses renew time process could be done in 15 minutes and only 23 days waiting period for the application of manufacturing and production license. Only one license required for the hotel industry instead of 14 licenses. In spite of that, in order to promote better quality of the civil services, he had ordered a task force to be headed by the Menteri Besar and the Chief Ministers. Most of the Chief Ministers responded well to his direction. The Immigration Department could cut red tape and enable the process passport application in 24 hours; the Inland Revenue Board able to process repayments in two days time instead of two week duration; and online services been upgraded to shorten the processing time and encourage more people-friendly nation. The times taken to process passport application by the Immigration Department since 1957 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Passport Application Duration by the Immigration Department (1957-2007)

Year	Duration
1957	3 months
1979	1 month
1986	2 weeks
1991	1 week
1995	5 days
2000	3 days
2004	24 hours
2007	2 hours

Source: Adapted from Bernama 5th March 2008.

The Immigration Department has also shortened the time taken for its nine public transactions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of Nine Public Transactions, (2008 – Years before)

No.	Types of Transaction	2008	Years before
1.	Passport applications	2 hours	3 days
2.	Passport replacement	2 hours	24 hours
3.	Application for housemaid	3 days	7 days
4.	Social visit pass	3 days	30 days
5.	Student pass	7 days	14 days
6.	Malaysia My Second Home	21 days	30 days
7.	Approval for Work Permit	7 days	14 days
8.	Issuance of Work Permit	3 days	7 days

Source: Adapted from the Immigration Department Director-General Datuk Wahi Md Don (Bernama, 5th March 2008).

Apart from upgrading better quality of civil services, Abdullah has urged all government departments to be the role model for private companies in terms of waste managements. Despite, Abdullah also encouraged government officers together with their families to take steps to reduce wastage as part of the overall effort towards a paperless government. This is a very important process because the government can save a lot of money by cutting down wastage and use the money for the improvement of the public services. As one of Abdullah's strong supporter and former Housing and Local Government Minister, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting said just by recycling the government wastage could save RM 88 million a year (The Star, 10th November 2003). According to Datuk Seri Dr. Ong Ka Ting, Malaysia is spending total RM 400 million just to manage the waste in the government. In March 2007, Abdullah had launched the Malaysian Green Building Mission with the aim of raising the level of awareness and promoting consolidating efforts in achieving sustainable building and construction.

Abdullah said, according to reports just days after took over the administration as Prime Minister that inefficiency in bureaucracy could lead to corruption. "If we pledge to ourselves, understand our responsibility,

we will not want to be involved in corruption and corruption will not occur,” he said when opening the Home Ministry’s Quality Day (New Straits Times, 13th November 2003). He also declared war on corruption and hoped civil servants to make a pledge not to be involved in corruption. Abdullah had launched the National Integrity Plan (NIP) and the Integrity Institute of Malaysia (IIM) as new measures to combat corruption. Hence with training provided, NIP and IIM are expected to significantly reduce corruption and improve the quality of life and people’s well-being.

Policy Agenda under Abdullah

Each Prime Minister has theirs’ own style of leadership. There are three main components of Abdullah’s leadership style; participation, accommodating and consensus, which enabled the bilateral relations between the people and government, as well as the public involve in government policy-making and programme (Azlina et al., 2007). For Abdullah, any opinion and negotiation no matter what the level or circumstances occur; it must be taken into consideration before make any decision. Former Minister Dato’ Sri Sharizat Jalil said Abdullah is very consultative and all decisions made in cabinet were taken after long and lengthy discussions because everyone was given a chance to voice their opinions (New Straits Times, 9th June 2006). However, there are many who consider this as a weakness because often the decision was made based on overall agreement. But for Abdullah, things are done his way in order to promote a transparent, ethics and responsible administration. Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria (2008), acknowledge that there are initiatives of Abdullah leadership and it created some space for common good. He also said Abdullah as the captain; must remain selfless and keep the best interest of not only his crew but also the ship, ensuring its safe passage through the rough waters (New Strait Times, 31th October 2008).

Economy under Abdullah

During Abdullah’s leadership, Malaysian has seen a good economical growth in accordance with the planning of the National Mission under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Abdullah proudly proclaim that “We will weather storm, Malaysia is doing quite well in economic fundamentals” when he chaired the first Economic Council meeting at Putrajaya Convention Centre on 11 August.

Agricultures were one of the highlighted issues during Abdullah's tenure as Malaysia's Prime Minister. Abdullah strongly believed that this industry can generate wealth and reduce poverty particularly among those from rural areas. In Ninth Malaysia Plan, Abdullah allocated a total of RM11.4 billion (approximately USD3.6 billion) increased 70 per cent compared to the previous Malaysia Plan (Wan Jan, 2009) to pursue the growth and development of agriculture-based industry. This is also a part of the government's strategy to eradicate poverty, which as explained previously is highest among rural villagers, many of whom are smallholder farmers. Tables below show the poverty rate during Abdullah's leadership.

Table 3: Poverty Rate (2004-2007)

Poverty Line Income	2004 (%)	2007 (%)
Poverty rate	5.7%	3.5%
Hardcore poor	1.2%	0.7%

Source: Adapted from Economic Planning Unit, 2008 and The Star, 29th January 2008.

Table 4: Income Ratio between Ethnic Groups

Ethnicity	2004	2007
Bumiputera and Chinese	1 : 1.64	1 : 1.52
Bumiputera and Indians	1 : 1.27	1 : 1.23
Indians and Chinese	1 : 1.28	1 : 1.23
Rural and Urban areas	1 : 2.11	1 : 1.99

Source: Adapted from Economic Planning Unit, 2008 and The Star, 29th January 2008.

From the tables, figure shows that the poor and hardcore poor have gotten higher income in 2007 compared in 2004. The Chinese's income rates are not growing fast enough; however the Bumiputeras and Indians are growing on turbo boost.

The following is the abstract of Abdullah with reference to the poverty rate in Malaysia "I am very happy to state here the positive effects of the development plans and projects we have implemented for the benefit of the people. The EPU's household income survey carried out last year showed the rate of poverty had gone down, with the number of hardcore poor reduced from 1.2 percent to 0.7 percent. This means that our target

to eradicate poverty by 2010 is achievable,” he said at an annual gathering of 8,000 civil servants organized by the National Institute of Public Administration (Intan) at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre” (The Star, 29th January 2008).

In spite of that, several mega projects were planned during Abdullah’ tenure as premier; such as restructuring LRT railway track in Klang Valley, Ipoh-Padang Besar, a West Coast Highway and a Penang Monorail. This goes to show that Abdullah was not only focused on agriculture development only. Another key economic strategy imposed during his premiership is to increase the salary of civil servants.

Conclusion

Abdullah has taken a more people friendly and community approached in his policies unlike his previous predecessors. This is obvious from his Islam Hadari principles. Islam Hadari seeks to promote a moderate or progressive view of Islamic civilization. Abdullah himself has stated, “We are responsible for ensuring that the culture of extremism and violent acts in the name of Islam does not happen in Malaysia” (Agence France Presse, 20th July 2005).

However, his people friendly and community approached in developing the nation’s policy has its own disadvantages. One of the obvious disadvantages is that the policy making process is too long and most of the time unsuccessful. This is due to too much uncontrolled politicking (within his own party) during his term. There is a need for some authoritarian in the policy making process in Asian countries. His inability to adapt to this culture resulted in his resignation as the prime minister in 2009. He was succeeded by his deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak.

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