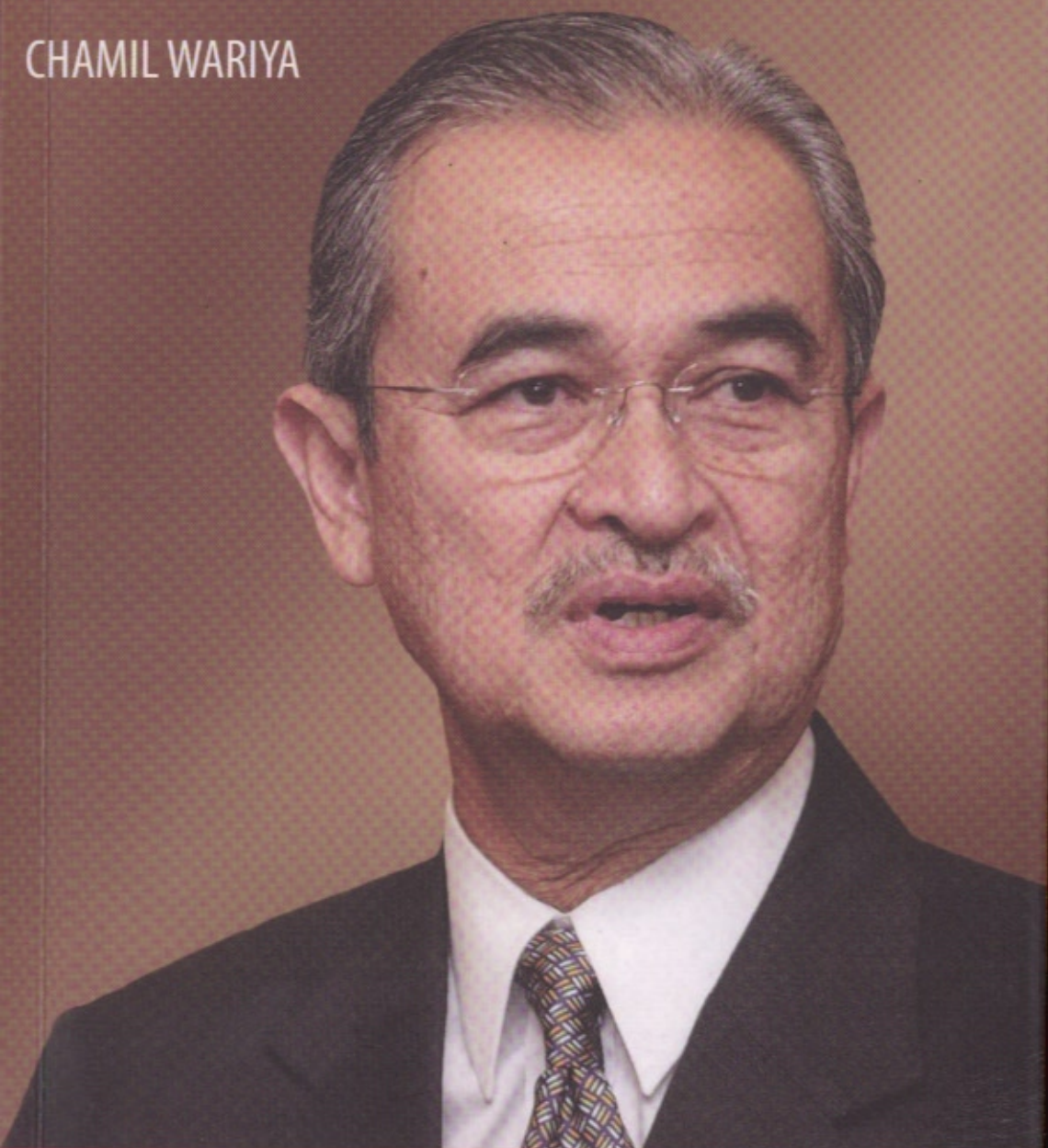


THE SURVIVOR MEETS THE CHALLENGE

CHAMIL WARIYA



ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI AND MALAYSIAN POLITICS

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Chapter 1

'THE APPLE NEVER FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE'



DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's political journey began not long after the political career of his father, Ahmad Badawi, had ended in 1977. The latter did not quit politics, his life-blood, but his demise on 7 May 1977 ended his involvement. Thus his state legislative assembly (DUN) seat of Bertam within the Kepala Batas parliamentary constituency fell vacant. Although his passing was very close to the date of the forthcoming general elections, the regulations at that time mandated a by-election to fill the vacancy. However, current election regulations stipulate that such a by-election need not be held should a parliamentary or DUN seat arise one and a half years from the date of the forthcoming general elections.

In remembrance of the good deeds of Datuk Ahmad Badawi, the National Front (BN) and the Kepala Batas UMNO Division agreed to the candidature of Abdullah to continue his father's and before that his grandfather, Sheikh Abdullah Fahim's good works and struggles for the district. The party leadership was in agreement. Even Abdullah, who was then a senior government executive with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, was reported to have consented to stand as a candidate. A technical glitch—Abdullah was registered in Kuala Lumpur where he resided and was not on the DUN Bertam electoral rolls, thus he could not be registered as a candidate—derailed the party's plan. Election rules stipulate that to contest any DUN seat, the candidate must be registered in that particular area.

A former teacher, Abdul Rahman Abbas (now Tun and governor of Penang) was thus nominated as a candidate in place of Abdullah who did not qualify to be that DUN candidate. Abdul Rahman won the seat uncontested. The opposition party, PAS (i.e. PMIP), recognising the late Ahmad Badawi's strong influence in Kepala Batas, decided not to contest that by-election as it realised that overcoming such a well-entrenched

power-base was nigh impossible. Though Abdullah was not the candidate then, his father's passing paved the way for him to enter politics. He did get his chance to be one during the 1978 General Elections.

'Coerced' Into Entering Politics

The 1978 General Elections was the first general elections for the then prime minister, Datuk Hussein Onn (later Tun), who took over the premiership following the demise of Tun Abdul Razak on 14 January 1976. Hussein's general election preparations checklist included a directive that certain UMNO divisions were to look for new faces, particularly among young people possessing reasonably good education, who were to be shortlisted as candidates to be nominated for parliamentary (MP) and state assembly (DUN) seats. Prime Minister Hussein was known to be particular because the educational background of candidates for government and party posts would be under scrutiny. He insisted that they should at least have a university education. He was alleged to have refused to consider Tun Ghafar Baba as deputy prime minister as Ghafar was just a graduate from the Sultan Idris Teaching College (MPSI).

The Kepala Batas UMNO Division was one of the divisions directed by the prime minister's political secretary to look for candidates who had university-level education. The Kepala Batas MP then was Datuk Sopiee Ibrahim, former director of information and Malaya's high commissioner to the United Kingdom. Upon receipt of the directive, his division met to discuss the matter and it had two names to offer as possible Kepala Batas MP candidates, both of whom were Penang-born holders of senior government posts in the public service. They were: director general of education, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Nor and deputy secretary-general of the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The party leadership picked the secretary of the Kepala Batas UMNO division, Datuk Mohd Noor Ahmad, as the person to get one of the two to agree to become their MP candidate.

Mohd Noor recollected how he thought persuading one of them was not going to be much of a problem as during that period, politicians were enthusiastically offering themselves up as MPs and ADUNs, who were usually addressed as 'Yang Berhormat' (The Honourable or Rt Honourable), as a mark of respect. Many were jostling, 'shoving and

pushing' hard for such honours but, Mohd Noor recalled, Murad and Abdullah were totally different. He had to meet and persuade them several times before one of them agreed to be the BN representative in the 1978 General Elections.

According to Mohd Noor, he first went to talk to Murad who flatly rejected the Kepala Batas UMNO request to name him candidate. Murad told Mohd Noor that he was not interested in politics and was more comfortable in his position of director general of education. During the meeting, Murad did not budge in spite of Mohd Noor's efforts to cajole him into standing. Realising that Murad was firm in not wanting to enter politics, Mohd Noor turned to Abdullah, truly hoping that Abdullah would not disappoint UMNO Kepala Batas, the division that was once led by his father, Datuk Ahmad Badawi.

It turned out that Abdullah was not keen either. He, too, was quite comfortable in his career in the public services, which he had been in since he graduated as a University Malaya Islamic Studies scholar in 1964. He began as an assistant secretary in the Public Services Department and then progressed to the post of principal assistant director of the National Operation Council (MAGERAN), a post he held for 21 months before he was appointed director. He then took over as deputy general secretary, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports even though he was still relatively young. 'Exceptional' was the word applied to his rise within the ranks of the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) then, such that the buzz was that Abdullah—who was very close with the nation's leaders not just because he was the son of an UMNO patriot but because of his exceptional abilities—was being prepared for a much higher position. He was touted as a probable secretary-general for a number of ministries and a future chief secretary to the government (KSN).

Mohd Noor admitted to having had three meetings with Abdullah in order to persuade him to be a candidate but Abdullah refused and insisted that Mohd Noor should continue coaxing Murad, who in Abdullah's opinion, in his position as director general of education, was the most apt candidate to represent Kepala Batas in Parliament. So Mohd Noor once again went to see Murad and this time, besides refusing his party leadership's overtures, Murad took a more aggressive stance and even berated Mohd Noor loudly: "You never understand, do you? I already said I have no political grounding. They want me to leave this place