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Dollah's phones are ringing again

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IT is 10.15am on a Monday morning and Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad is already humming along like a human dynamo in the office annex of his bungalow home.

As I make my way along the long, carpeted corridor flanked by photographs and paintings, I can hear him talking away, a mile a minute.

Abdullah's office is one of the more homey rooms in this stylish house located in one of the most exclusive parts of Kuala Lumpur.

Two pairs of reading glasses - one metal-rimmed and another with brown frames and green-tinted lenses - lie on the very neat table which he tells us is usually not so tidy.

An entire wall is hung with scholastic certificates earned by the family but it is the photographs - they're everywhere - which lend the room its intimacy.

He looks markedly different from then, but his wife, Puan Sri Fauzah Mohamad Darus, an elegant woman with chiselled features, has changed little. Family photographs almost equal those of Abdullah during the years when he moved in the intoxicating inner circle of power.

"My first datukship," he says of a 1971 black-and-white shot of the Sultan of Kelantan (who conferred the title) and Abdullah, both seated in a rather casual fashion on either side of a very slim Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who is drawing languidly on a cigarette.

Pointing to another photograph - faded around the edges - of him chatting with Tan Sri Musa Hitam, he says with a laugh: "I was really powerful then."

"One of the last ones of Tun. Died Jan, 1976. That date will never be erased from my mind," he says of a large print of Tun Razak Hussein, with the narrator a few steps behind.

A shot of Tun Hussein Onn (with Abdullah beside him) is passed off as "my jailor". The pictures pretty much sum up his rather controversial path from the 60s and well into the 70s. His years of living dangerously, so to speak.

Abdullah has been Malaysia's Special Envoy to the United Nations since 1996, a post he has taken to like a duck to water.

And last week, just days before he was to return to New York, he found himself on the "crony list" revealed in a statutory declaration by former Bank Negara assistant governor Datuk Abdul Murad Khalid.

Minutes after Murad's Press conference, his telephone was ringing with calls from the media (for reaction) and friends (for explanations).

Abdullah denies being an Anwar crony although he does not deny that Anwar, via Murad, played a role in settling an outstanding loan. But he stresses that the settlement was in exchange for some prime land he owned along Jalan Duta. "I have the documents to prove it," he says.

Abdullah was in the news again.

The man himself takes some getting used to: his energy, his running - and irreverent - commentary on events, issues and people, his tendency of flitting from topic to topic without prelude, his compulsion with his political past (he still identifies himself on the phone as "Dollah, Kok Lanas", a reference to his former parliamentary seat in Kelantan), and his enduring attachment to the memory of the late Tun Abdul Razak.

And he can be, as an NST editor notes, "so charming".

Abdullah, or Dollah as he is popularly known, is a person whose

reputation truly precedes him. For instance, if one were to mention that one has just met/spoken to/interviewed Abdullah, the other party is likely to go, "Ooh ... that Dollah," the tone varying depending on whether or not the person is fond of him.

You see, there are no two ways about Tan Sri Dollah, especially when it comes to the crowd who knew him from his political years. They either like him or they don't and the same holds for Abdullah - he has few grey area-type opinions.

Yet, Abdullah in person today is quite different from the larger-than-life personality one reads about or hears of.

He has, as they like to say, mellowed with age (he turned 62 recently), grown a little more accommodating and even learnt to laugh at himself. His hair is more salt than pepper and his middle a little more pronounced (he insists it's his posture) but the mischievous grin is still intact.

That day, he has on a light blue shirt ("they call it TV blue in America"), and pale beige drill trousers, rolled up at the cuffs.

And socks and leather shoes because of the photo shoot. It's a casual but expensive look. And Abdullah has always had expensive tastes, even as a cub reporter.

Former Straits Times news editor Felix Abisheganaden told Malaysian Business once that Abdullah had "champagne tastes on a beer income" and went for suede shoes while others wore Bata. And soon after he began working for Razak, he was zooming about in a flashy Mercedes Sports.

He was spiffily dressed even in the Kamunting detention camp where he was held under the ISA. A picture taken by his wife then shows him in white shirt, MCKK tie (must have been a Wednesday) and white V-necked pullover!

Juxtapose all that against his posh lifestyle now and it seems almost comical that anyone could have had tried to tar him a Communist. But those years spent as a political detainee (1976 to 1981) were no laughing matter for him. "I was 38, at the zenith of my political career, then zap!"

He still gets emotional talking about it, his voice gets all choked up. The experience continues to rankle although he says he has forgiven "Ghulam", his nickname for the person he says masterminded the Red-hunt and whom he coyly refuses to name except to say it is not Hussein Onn.

Still, Abdullah has made not one but two remarkable comebacks since his release (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad signed his release order two weeks after becoming Prime Minister, a fact Abdullah has never forgotten).

Four years after his release, he was returned as MP for Kok Lanas, Kelantan, in the 1986 general election.

It was around that time that he set off ripples on both sides of the Causeway when he made a no-holds-barred speech in Singapore on the legitimacy of Malay political hegemony and won himself the label of an ultra-Malay.

Yet, this was the same man who gave his backing to the setting-up of the Chung Hwa Secondary School in Kok Lanas which is, today, considered the best Chinese school on the eastern sea board.

If he had larger ambitions after his 1986 win, it was swiftly ended by the Pas-Semangat 46 sweep of the State in 1990.

He did not contest the 1995 polls and a year later, found himself in his present capacity - living life on the international circuit.

Abdullah's mellowing may also have to do with being out of the political game.

He gave up his last political post - head of Machang division in 1995. But that does not mean he does not miss it all.

"Power, that's the thing I miss most. Who wouldn't, honestly?" he says in that disarmingly frank way.

A few years ago, he told NST columnist Datuk Mazlan Nordin about reading Dwight Eisenhower's reminiscences on how the telephones stopped ringing the second day after he retired as US President. That must have been how it was for him after the death of Razak.

Abdullah's ascent to the charmed life of inner circle politics makes fascinating copy.

He was born in 1937, the son of a village penghulu in Pasir Mas, but brought up by a well-off uncle who sent him to the elite Malay College, Kuala Kangsar. MCKK was one of those watershed events in his life and more or less set him on his future path.

After leaving school, he joined the Straits Times in 1957 where he became quickly known to Umno politicians.

Three years later, he left for the US on a Congressional Fellowship recommended by Razak.

He returned after 18 months to a job at the Alliance headquarters where his first important assignment was to sniff around in Sarawak in the wake of plans for the formation of Malaysia.

"Tun was very pleased with my work and promoted me to political secretary in October 1963. I was to be his ears and eyes and to report to him directly."

Says fellow "Razak boy", Musa Hitam: "He was Razak's not-so-secret weapon. He was always running around, doing things for Tun. Everybody knew that. And he was very loyal, he took the brickbats for Tun."

Nevertheless, it was an exciting job that gave him access to the exclusive backroom of power and made him an object to be envied, even feared. From then, he steadily accumulated friends and enemies.

"He was young and brash. Besides, a hatchet man cannot be popular," says another Razak-period figure.

Abdullah's own view: "That's what power is all about ... there will be those who like or dislike you. But I was really riding high in the 60s. I could do what I liked, go where I wished, but Tun had to be able to contact me at any time. I was his political secretary, Pressman, friend, everything."

Datuk Shahrir Samad, Razak's political secretary after Abdullah, explains it as a common problem in politics.

"Your power comes from the boss and often you exercise a lot more power than people think you deserve and the resentment builds. Frankly, I don't think he did it for himself as much as for his boss."

He spent 14 years with Razak and by the time Malaysia's Bapa Pembangunan succumbed to his illness, Abdullah was an Umno supreme council member, MP and Deputy Minister.

Abdullah's dark experience after Razak's death is perhaps one of the more stark and scary periods of Machiavellian politics in local political history.

Stripped of his source of political patronage and protection, Abdullah became a pawn in the power play for the pinnacle post.

What happened was a fascinating demonstration of unbridled ambitions and of the ferociousness of Malay politics. But most of all, it was an invaluable reminder of the transient nature of political power.

In retrospect, Abdullah jokes that his arrest might have had to do with the government quarters at Bukit Petaling where he was living.

Michael Chen, then an MP, had warned him about the bungalow and the bad luck that had befallen previous occupants: Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin was dropped from the Cabinet and despatched as Ambassador to the US; Tan Sri Lee Siok Yew lost the No. 2 post in the MCA. Abdullah lived there half a year before his arrest.

Even though Abdullah loves to dwell on the past, and misses dearly those

days of power and influence, there is really little to complain about his present state.

For one, his phones have begun ringing again, whether for the right or wrong reasons. In fact, they seemed to ring non-stop throughout the interview.

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