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Pak Lah served Malaysia well as Foreign Minister

Din Merican

SYABAS to Pak Lah for his stewardship of Malaysian foreign policy and for being the country's longest-serving Foreign Minister.

He will certainly be remembered for having won Malaysia many friends all over the world by assiduously working to establish Malaysia as a tolerant, moderate, caring and constructive member of the international community.

He has faithfully upheld the tradition of sobriety and forthrightness in Malaysian foreign policy. This is no mean achievement for someone who came to the job as a novice, and left as a professional.

His crowning achievement is his pivotal role in the assumption of Malaysia to the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member for the next two years.

It is typical of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi not to claim all the credit. In his farewell address at the recent Wisma Putra dinner, he paid high tribute to men in the Foreign Service, who had slogged tirelessly behind the scenes and under "spartan" conditions to be in the first line of defence of our country's national interest, which includes national security and well-being.

He also sincerely paid tribute to the advice given by Malaysia's foreign policy guru, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, who laid the foundations of a professional foreign service. Some of these true blue professionals under the tutelage of "King Ghaz" are today still in the service.

His parting advice, which he picked up from Ghazali, to the men of Wisma Putra was "never tell a lie". What he meant is that Malaysian foreign policy must be consistent and credible. Therefore, what is right is right, and what is wrong can only be wrong. There is nothing in-between.

Unfortunately, there is temptation today to regard might as right, and a tendency for some countries, large or small, to go along with the powerful in the name of expediency. What is expedient is not necessarily right. Malaysia has always opted to be a "friend" rather than an "ally" to any one.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has also made a wise choice in the successor to Abdullah. Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar comes to Wisma Putra with a solid background, having served the Justice and Defence portfolios and the private sector where he was a respected banker.

In his interview on TV3's Malaysia Hari Ini recently, he showed a keen grasp and understanding of Malaysia's foreign policy. The premium that the new Foreign Minister places on professionalism and team work, thereby continuing the tradition established by Ghazali, is noteworthy.

Syed Hamid's emphasis on professionalism and team work is most reassuring to all Malaysians who value the role of the foreign service in credibly promoting the national interest.

Our taxpayers will certainly support a professional foreign service as Wisma Putra has always delivered.