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Warm welcome to Pak Lah

Rose Ismail; Pang Hin Yue

FINALLY, the post has been filled. And as if to endorse this, the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange on Monday responded positively to the cabinet reshuffle and appointment of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the new deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister.

The composite index breached 600 points by mid-morning before closing at 598.46.

"The appointment of Abdullah," said one investment analyst, "reduces the political risk factor." Without a clear successor to the PM, investors were apparently nervous about Malaysia.

The analyst, however, felt that the market on Monday would have fared better had it not been for the release of the Industrial Production Index in the afternoon, indicating a decline in exports.

Still, he conceded, the mood remained upbeat with Pak Lah - as Abdullah is fondly called - filling the number two post in the country's top leadership.

"Overall," he said with optimism, "the market is bullish".

Long-time friends and supporters of Pak Lah could not agree more.

"I am overjoyed!" beamed M. Athinasamy. He had waited close to two hours at Wisma Putra on Monday to garland Pak Lah and congratulate him on his promotion.

"Nine years ago, I told Pak Lah that he would be made YAB (Yang Amat Berhormat) one day. My prediction has come true," he enthused.

When Pak Lah finally showed up, Athinasamy was grinning from ear to ear. "Eh, what are you doing here?" Pak Lah joked as he shook hands with Athinasamy who was there with five other friends (and fans) of Pak Lah.

The ex-chairman of the Jalan Gurney MIC branch recalled how Pak Lah went out of his way to help people, irrespective of race, when he was the Deputy Federal Territory Minister between 1980 and 1982.

"The Prime Minister has made a wise choice," declared Athinasamy.

Not everyone, of course, thinks so. Pak Lah's detractors have wasted no time listing his weaknesses.

There are claims that Pak Lah is nothing more than a bureaucrat, "an obedient servant... and it is feared that he would be more servile than ever to the Prime Minister".

Another comment, reported in a foreign newspaper was that Pak Lah's appointment could disrupt the equilibrium within Umno because the Prime Minister had alienated two other party "warlords".

Others have picked on Pak Lah's lack of forcefulness and his seeming vacillation in politics.

Still, no one can deny him of his contributions in active politics for the past 35 years. Pak Lah's long climb in Umno, for most part, was a smooth rise (see chart on Page 5) until 1987 when, arriving at a crossroad, he decided to cast his lot with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Datuk Musa Hitam - collectively known as Team B - to challenge Dr Mahathir Mohamad's leadership.

Despite his decision to support Team B and his removal from the Cabinet soon after, sending him into the political wilderness, he remained loyal to Umno.

His brief period as a "rebel" cost him dearly. In 1993 he failed to retain his post as one of three V-Ps which he had held since 1984.

It was only three years later that he regained the post, emerging second

among seven contenders.

His return, during a period when money politics was threatening to destabilise the party, was seen as a clear endorsement by Umno delegates that clean leadership was urgently needed at the top.

In fact, his image as being clean has helped him surmount many obstacles.

As Royal Professor Ungku Aziz said, the man holds the rare distinction in Malaysian politics of being "super-clean".

His amiable, unprepossessing ways as well as his humility has also made him popular not just within Umno but outside the party as well.

One Chinese businessman said on the day after the announcement was made, he travelled the length of the North-South Expressway and at every stop, everyone was talking about how "apt" it was for Pak Lah to be made DPM.

Ungku Aziz said the appointment brings stability. "It appeases all Malaysians. The Chinese aren't upset, the Malays like him, even civil servants have great admiration for him."

Given the recent political upheavals arising from the removal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the Cabinet and Umno, there is no doubt in Ungku Aziz's mind that Pak Lah is the appropriate candidate.

Others agree. "Pak Lah will heal the party and country... a good candidate to help us slow down a little, reflect on where we are heading, where we were ... we need this period to sort out who we are and what we want to be," said a political analyst.

Moreover, Pak Lah's approach to religion, which Ungku Aziz categorises as "the Islamic middle way", is needed to unite Muslims.

His discussions with women's groups also reveal his egalitarian approach to gender issues. "He believes in equality, has progressive views on Islam and will handle the ulamak in a non-confrontational way," said a woman's rights activist.

"This is important because the ulamak have to understand that the world has changed, that women have just as many rights as men."

For those who welcome Pak Lah's appointment, they are not perturbed by detractors who harp on what they call his Achilles heel - his mildness. They said that like Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second premier, whom many had underestimated, Pak Lah will do well.

Tun Razak, they reminded, turned out to be a leader who changed the country radically.

As Ungku Aziz pointed out: "History makes men ... and this will be his (Pak Lah's) time to help us sort out our problems."

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