

# Pak 'Lah: It's a rewarding

Nst 1 8 JUN 2000

Q: WHAT has life been like as DPM?

A: Busy, very busy. I've never been this busy. Otherwise, I'm the same dull Pak 'Lah (laughs). Seriously, it's work, work and more work. Get up early in the morning, finish late at night. But once I'm out and about my work, I go on until sometimes 2am.

I'm not one to sleep in the afternoon. I get by on about five hours of sleep. My wife is very concerned about my health. But before the last general assembly, I had a thorough medical check-up no problems, all clear.

Q: What is it like working with Dr Mahathir?

A: Very rewarding because you have time to discuss with him and Dr Mahathir is a man with dynamic thinking, always forward-looking. At same time he has a very strong capacity for detailed analysis. And he allows people to give their views. He's a very good listener.

Q: Does PM consult you much because he is known to keep things close to his chest?

A: It depends on the level and responsibility and what you are doing. Remember when he was asked about appointments to the supreme council? He said I was not around and he would like to consult me first. He will consult those who are relevant.

Q: What do you think of the newly-elected supreme council?

A: There is a good variety and I know these people have different opinions. Some are in the Cabinet and Government, some are not. Some are quite critical, some are less. There are those who have been out and come back . a variety of opinions and it's only to be expected. That is the sort of process we should create, people throwing in a variety of views. It helps improve policymaking.

**Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was appointed Deputy Prime Minister a year and a half ago. He took a breather from his busy schedule to answer questions ranging from Umno politics to whether he will become the next Prime Minister of Malaysia. Report by JOCELINE TAN.**

allow the intelligence chief to take the stand in court and be cross-examined.

Q: Are you open to criticism?

A: Whenever I meet my friends, I say: Tell all the bad things they say about me, not just good ones. We shouldn't kill the messenger who brings information you don't like. That information may save our lives, or careers too. There's no such thing as wanting only good information.

Q: Are there people around you prepared to bring this type of news?

A: Yes, there are. All these people (gestures to his Press secretary Kamarulzaman Zainal and special assistant Khairy Jamaluddin) you think they tell me only the good stuff? No, my staff will tell me the bad news. But there has to be sincerity, don't bluff, don't tell lies, don't fabricate information. I hate that. If it's 10 per cent good, don't say 50 per cent.

Q: There was so much speculation about who PM would pick as DPM. Did you have any inkling?

A: I read everything that was written about the speculation. I like to know what people think about me, about others. I don't hold it against them. As for PM, he doesn't tell nothing from him. I only knew when he announced it at the (supreme council) meeting. That was the first time.

Yes, he met me more than three times before (the announcement). We talked, he asked for my views and all that but no hints, nothing not even a phone call to tell me I got the job. That's PM. And he never explained why he picked me. You

they say they don't, they are telling lies. But not everyone is going to be there at the top.

Dato Onn (Jaafar) was such a popular leader who led the Malays before independence but he left Umno. Then Tunku became the leader although he was no orator like Dato Onn. He spoke the Kedah dialect and people used to make fun of it.

Dr Mahathir was expelled from Umno but he came back — today he is PM. Musa, too, but he came back as DPM. (Tun) Hussein Onn was in Parti Negara with his father but he came back and became Prime Minister. Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah led Kelantan to fantastic election results and in 1987 he was out of everything.

Ghafar was already running his last round when Anwar came in. He was already VP when Anwar was still running around in pampers. And when Anwar became DPM, everybody said: This must be the man. Then Pak 'Lah came . . . that's a surprise for you.

Q: Dr Mahathir has set a tough act for you to follow.

A: Whether I remain as I am or take over, I will always be the nice Pak 'Lah. But sometimes, when people use the word nice, they mean something else. I would prefer nice and fair. But the most important thing is to be correct and fair when making tough decisions.

Q: What are the convictions that keep you going?

A: I absolutely believe in the Umno struggle, that it is still relevant to the Malays

**Q: What was the message you got from the delegates at the Umno general assembly?**

**A:** That Umno is still relevant, that the Umno struggle must go on and that Umno is still important. At the same time, they would like us to take a hard look at Umno, at some of the problems we are facing in Umno.

**Q: Some say that Umno is at some kind of political watershed?**

**A:** I believe that if we go down and explain to the people, respond to the questions they ask and also some of their demands, we will be able to reach and understand them.

**Q: There has been this expression for a more open government.**

**A:** Come now, many talk about it. How many actually know what they are talking about. It is fashionable to talk like this now. There was a time when dialogue was the word . . . immediately after the launching of the NEP. The person who popularised the term, dialogue, was (Tan Sri) Ghazali Shafie it was dialogue, dialogue, dialogue, as if we had never had any kind of mechanism that enabled the *rakyat* to exchange views.

Then there was a period when it was about participation in decision-making. It was the clarion call among youth leaders at the time. Now they are talking about cronyism, nepotism . . . well, I hope they understand. Transparency . . . they cannot expect us to reveal everything. No government in the world reveals everything. But the dialogue process is there. We are not trying to deny people information, just that nowhere in the world is there 100 per cent transparency.

A senior police officer from a developed country told his Malaysian counterparts he was surprised that the special branch chief testified at the Anwar Ibrahim trial. They told us this sort of thing would never happen in their country, that they would never

have to read his interview with the *Mainichi Times*, I guess.

**Q: What sort of No 2 role do you see for yourself?**

**A:** I see myself as no more than the deputy. I don't delegate myself the alternate leader. A deputy is a deputy. So many lessons to be learnt how Tan Sri Musa (Hitam) conducted himself, and (Tun) Ghafar (Baba), and how (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) conducted himself. I thought Anwar was already putting himself as the other leader, the second general in the army on the ship and I was strongly admonished and criticised by his close friends for saying that the army has only one general.

**Q: You favoured Datuk Dr Rais Yatim and Datuk Syed Hamid Albar for vice-presidents?**

**A:** So it was said (grins).

**Q: How's your relations with the three VPs?**

**A:** They always think I'm going to have problems with these three VPs. I have no problems with them. Neither with Datuk Seri Najib (Razak), or Tan Sri Muhyiddin (Yassin), or Tan Sri Muhammad (Muhammad Taib). They are saying, when is Pak 'Lah going to have a fight with these people? When are they going to challenge Pak 'Lah? That's the talk. They do not know our relationship.

**Q: Datuk Seri Najib had the highest number of votes. Does that mean you will have him as your running mate?**

**A:** The time has not come yet and you are asking me . . . speculation upon speculation. It's not proper, not yet.

**Q: You are Dr Mahathir's fourth DPM. Do you see yourself succeeding him?**

**A:** God willing, I'll be there. Who doesn't want to be promoted? I always believe that in life, whether you succeed or not, you have to work hard to go up. All politicians up to a certain level have aspirations. If

and nation. I am a staunch Umno man.

**Q: Many Umno politicians grew prominent via the ultra-Malay platform. You were always rather moderate.**

**A:** It was true in those days but not every Malay leader plays this card. You have to remember that at the beginning of the Malay struggle the often-heard phrase was Malay fear, *keimbangan Melayu*. They lacked confidence about their place and role in their own country.

So many leaders wanted to champion the Malay struggle but today this is no longer a big problem. The Malays have confidence in themselves.

**Q: Do you see the two main Malay parties coming together?**

**A:** I do not know but Pas was once with Umno. We thought that was the best thing to happen. Then suddenly we were divorced. Now people are talking about it again, for Pas and Umno to unite. We just listen. I think there is room for *mumkarah*.

**Q: How do you see the way Islam and politics have become so intertwined?**

**A:** In Islam, politics and religion cannot be separated. We were created to serve Allah. There are the personal obligations, *fardhu ain*, and there are the obligations we have to the community *fardhu kifayah*. Politics fulfils the second function. We are not complaining about the relationship between politics and religion but about Pas spreading false teachings among Muslims.

**Q: Did Umno really intend to do anything to the name of Pas?**

**A:** We are watching the situation. Our concern is Pas claiming to be more Islamic than others and spreading wrong teachings of Islam. We are not afraid to face them. Islam does not make politics an excuse to do wrong.

**Q: How long more do you think Terengganu and Kelantan will remain with Pas?**

**A:** Not long I hope. We have to work hard. Don't just talk to win back Kelantan and

Terengganu.

**Q: Is the dissatisfaction among Malays a big challenge for you?**

**A:** Dissatisfaction was there even in the past. I would be surprised if Malays had no comments, no ideas to voice or even to criticise. That would be sad, a sign that something is wrong with Malay society. At the same time, people must also listen and understand the problems and responsibilities of those in power. We must explain to them.

**Q: Dr Mahathir has come under criticism of late. Have you had to defend him?**

**A:** I have always defended him. I remember I was asked to talk about the thoughts of Mahathir. After that two lady students came forward and said: Pak 'Lah thanks, you have changed our minds about Dr Mahathir. They may not like him but to say he is *mahafiraun*, cruel, dictatorial, that's wrong.

**Q: You've managed to stay 'Mr Clean' all these years.**

**A:** I have spoken against money politics for a long time. Look up the NST. In 1993, I took up the issue, spoke against it. It's a challenge we have to take. We have to be tough but fair. You don't want to go for someone and be wrong. I don't want that.

I am chairman of the management and disciplinary committee but we haven't got

concrete evidence. Just complaints about the use of money here and there. Basically, reporting coffeeshop talk. That's not good enough.

I have been telling people to please come forward and give evidence. Some people lodged formal complaints but not enough evidence. You have to complain based on evidence and facts. The trouble is there is conspiracy between the giver and receiver in money politics.

**Q: Do you think you might be a stronger DPM with the experience of a contest?**

**A:** It's the same, contest or no contest. It's not as if I have never known contest. I have been through it alone, ostracised, when some people even feared being seen with me when I was out of the Cabinet. I have not been walking on a bed of roses, I have been firewalking to be where I am. Even at the last party elections, it was not as though I had it easy. The nominations were being fought out on the floor in Umno divisions which were Razaleigh strongholds. But I won the nominations except in two divisions.

**Q: How would you sum up your one-and-a-half years as DPM?**

**A:** A thoroughly rewarding experience. And not as tough as I thought it would be.