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Abdullah's long journey

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AT about 5.15pm, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's jet-black Proton Perdana came sweeping round a curve along Jalan Bellamy where he lives in a spacious government bungalow.

It might have been just about anybody else coming home from work were it not for the pair of police outriders, their blue lights flashing urgently, and a small convoy of police cars.

The suited Deputy Prime Minister climbed out of his car and disappeared into the house to wash and perform his asar prayers.

He reappeared about 20 minutes later, looking relaxed and refreshed, his hair still somewhat damp and wearing a creamy green baju Melayu, dark trousers and sandals.

Abdullah - Dollah to his close friends and Pak 'Lah to almost everyone else - settled down at the large, round marble-topped table, a glass of air suam in front of him.

His aides had been discussing the interview their boss had with CNBC that morning and Abdullah joined in as they laughed over the way the interviewer had tried to press him to say when he would become Prime Minister.

"On and on, they kept trying to pin me down on that," he said good-naturedly while I quickly - and a little guiltily - did a mental scale-down of my own intention in that area.

Abdullah, as they say, has come a long way to arrive at the threshold of the country's top political post.

He is 60 this year and his hair is streaked with grey, but he still cuts a dapper figure especially since his wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood began disciplining his diet about four years ago.

The kindly face and manners are still the most attractive part of his personality. He has tremendous self-control and, it is said that while others count to 10, Abdullah often calms his feelings by placing both palms on his chest and gently massaging his upper chest with his thumbs; then he speaks carefully.

"I have not been walking on a bed of roses, I've been firewalking to be where I am," was his own description of his political journey.

It's been a long journey for this former civil servant and Islamic Studies graduate of Universiti Malaya.

Abdullah was already a promising civil servant when he was picked as the principal assistant secretary to the powerful National Operations Council that was formed in the aftermath of the race riots of 1969.

Although his abilities were quickly noticed by the politicians, it took another good 10 years before he could be persuaded into full-time politics.

But once in, his ascent was steady - Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Territory Ministry (1978 to 1981), Federal Territory Deputy Minister (1980 to 1981), Minister in the PM's Department (1981 to 1984), Education Minister (1984 to 1986) and Defence Minister (1986 to 1987).

He backed Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in the Umno fight of 1987 and when Team B lost, he was dropped from the Cabinet.

Even during those difficult years in the political wilderness, he managed to claim the Umno vice-president's post, a fact Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad acknowledged by bringing him back to the Cabinet as Foreign Minister in 1991.

And although he lost the VP post in the ringgit-flush contest of 1993, he remained in Wisma Putra until Jan 8, 1999, the day he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister.

Many tend to forget Abdullah's long public career when they talk about him today.

And he is fully aware of the way he is perceived for he had laughingly said at the start of the interview: "... I'm the same dull Pak 'Lah."

Abdullah is going through what an Umno division leader from Johor described as the "DPM syndrome".

"Every DPM goes through it ... they will compare you to the current PM, the previous PMs and in Pak 'Lah's case, previous DPMS," said the Johor politician.

Even Dr Mahathir, the politician added, went through a period of public doubt on account of his radical image during the Tunku era. The Chinese, particularly, saw him as an ultra-Malay but he went on to become a Prime Minister who transcended all kinds of boundaries.

Likewise, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ascent in Umno was watched with apprehension because of his Islamic activism in Abim.

The oft-heard argument among older Malaysians and the business community is that Malaysia's complex multi-culturality calls for a special kind of political leader. Dr Mahathir was one such leader whether people may like or dislike him.

In that sense, Abdullah's biggest problem may be none other than Dr Mahathir, in the sense that the latter has set a tough act to follow.

Generally, people are still not sure whether the Mr Nice Guy in Abdullah is sufficiently tough and alert - in both the political and intellectual sense - to take over from Dr Mahathir.

"Of course, he can," said a Malay businessman close to him.

Pak 'Lah, he said, has to be understood in terms of his loyalty and continuity in Umno, his moderate and clean image, his knowledge of the political machinery and his experience in Government.

"It's just unfortunate he doesn't blow his own trumpet and I know his aides get very frustrated because of all the comments," said the businessman.

The business and diplomatic community, in particular, cannot help but wonder what sort of Prime Minister he will make.

The curiosity has an urgency to it because of the perception that Dr Mahathir is in his last lap.

Said think-tanker Dr Nungsari Ahmad Radhi: "I don't think he's the softy people think he is. He's been around long enough to understand Malaysian political realities. I think he understands power, how to use it, what to use it for.

"And you cannot expect him to be another Dr Mahathir. You can't use the Mahathir template on Pak 'Lah. They are two completely different individuals."

Those acquainted with the DPM say he is not only different from Dr Mahathir but from the other DPMS who have served under Dr Mahathir.

For a start, he is acutely conscious of his role as No. 2 to Dr Mahathir, a point he was to stress several times during the interview.

"He is one man who feels perfectly comfortable as deputy," said Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid who was several years Abdullah's junior in school.

Abdullah, it is said, does not take liberties with the PM despite his own years and seniority in Umno.

A close associate was present once when a call came in from the PM; he noted the respect with which Abdullah accorded the PM.

"He addressed the PM as 'Sir' throughout the conversation," the

associate said.

His Cabinet colleagues say his strength as DPM lies in his Islamic credentials and clean image.

"If you are talking about the man who can take on the Pas leadership ... he can, especially given the way religion is being exploited in politics," said Azmi.

"I've seen him perform in the Cabinet ... he is a doer," said Datuk Dr Rais Yatim.

The Chinese political community has a more pragmatic perception.

"He is not that dynamic but nobody can say he is inferior. Characterwise, he is completely aboveboard," said a senior MCA figure.

Family lineage and background also carries weight among the Chinese and the fact that Abdullah comes from a family with impeccable Islamic credentials impresses them.

The MCA figure went on: "They say that, politically, he has no network. But com'on, once you sit in that chair, the network will form around you. Look at Dr Mahathir ... when he was in exile, nobody went near him. But once he was back and on top ... whoosh! They were swarming all around him."

One of the biggest concerns of the business set regarding Abdullah is how he will handle the economy. They point out that he has no experience in that area.

The counterpoint from his supporters: Most of the DPMS had no economic background either (when Anwar was appointed Finance Minister, a newspaper editor jokingly sent him a volume on elementary economics).

Besides, they added, the Government does not rest on one set of shoulders.

Or as a well-known KL-based corporate figure put it: "It's not a question of whether you have great knowledge or insight into economics.

"It's about having the acumen and wisdom to surround yourself with competent and honest people who can provide good advice and who have the alertness of mind to help you sieve through the choices. I believe he will attract a lot of people wanting to make themselves available."

Part of Abdullah's problem is that although the public, and particularly Umno, have become accustomed to him as DPM, they are not quite sure he will be the successor to Dr Mahathir. He is, after all, Dr Mahathir's fourth deputy.

Secondly, he was carried into the post without a real contest, making it somewhat difficult for the political alignments in the party to gauge his strength.

Already, there is speculation that he may have to fend off vice-president Datuk Najib Razak, who bagged the most number of votes among the VPs, in 2003 or that he may have to contend with the three VPs.

Abdullah seemed outwardly sanguine about such speculation, insisting that he enjoyed a good relationship with the three VPs and that, "God willing, I'll be there".

Those close to him explained it this way: "He wants to be PM; except for him, it's not ambition at any cost. If it comes to him, then he will say: 'Alhamdulillah'. But he is not going to challenge PM for it.

"He's said it to us so many times: 'If PM wants me to take it, I will. But I'm not going to push or hurry him. If it's my fate to be PM then so be it. If not, so be it too.'"

Outside of Umno, his upright and scandal-free image has people comparing him to the late Tun Hussein Onn.

They noted that Hussein may have had shortcomings but he brought back a commitment to certain standards at a time when Umno was reeling under immense internal politicking and the controversy surrounding Datuk Harun

Idris.

Abdullah is also seen as uncontroversial and a consensus-seeker who would be well-positioned as the "healing hand that binds".

Whatever it is, said one of his supporters, "Pak 'Lah is a decent, God-fearing politician. They are rare, you know."