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What Abdullah could or would be

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FOR more than a year now, my youngest son in London has been experimenting with electronic-books in his personal quest to judge a book by its lack of a cover.

My idea of reading pleasure is to read a book in bed - curled up with a pillow. Could anyone curl up with a pillow and an e-book?

The old saying that one must not judge a book by its cover nor a person by his dress is even more relevant today. Bumiputeras generally - the story seems all too familiar - judge the religiosity of a man or a woman by what he or she wears or says, not by what the person does. The true test is whether the person is useful to his community and country. No one judges a person's piety except God.

Umno will - whatever it takes - remain in power to ensure Bumiputeras survive and that Vision 2020 is achieved. The Prime Minister and president of Umno Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has urged Umno members and all Malaysians to give his third chosen heir (first Musa Hitam and then Anwar Ibrahim; Ghafar Baba was an interim appointment), Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, their undivided support when he takes over from him.

In spite of the fact that Abdullah has been in and out of government for a considerable time, not many Malaysians, especially the non-Muslims, know him well. Abdullah is, for sure, not Dr Mahathir nor like his three immediate predecessors. For instance, Abdullah is so unlike his one-time rival, the jailed former deputy prime minister and deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, for Abdullah speaks in simple language so that his message can reach ordinary people. He has no desperate need to be loved, laughs a little sometimes and plays acceptably good golf.

Abdullah is a graduate in Islamic studies, unlike Anwar who is a graduate in Malay studies. Abdullah's father and grandfather were religious scholars. Despite his background, Abdullah is a moderate and enlightened Malay who, while giving strong affirmation to upholding Islam, has promised unequivocally to fight Pas' religious extremism. His determination to fight - albeit in different language and idioms - against divisiveness and intolerance should calm the non-Muslim Malaysians.

His open pledge during the Umno general assembly last week: "The politics of Pas which fosters divisiveness is a blight I will oppose. If its (Pas) negative activities are not stopped, I believe the sanctity of Islam will be compromised and non-Muslims will not accept that Islamic teachings bring good to the people. The Pas political programme constitutes a crime against Islam, disruptive to the harmony of the Muslim ummah. Preventing Pas from continuing to perpetuate this crime is obligatory for me. I am prepared to be at the forefront to do battle with this group which is using Islam to sow seeds of hate and division." Strong words from a man who seems gentle, even dull, but able and approachable. I believe in Abdullah's firm commitment to fight a wilful Pas.

This forthright statement from the next Prime Minister was buried by the media in the back pages. I have decided to highlight it because it is important that Malaysians of all races know a little more about our next leader.

I have known Abdullah for more than three decades. I know he is a dedicated person who can lead diverse people and I am confident - when the time comes - that he can decide the future of Malaysia with our consent. Abdullah's policy statement on the future shape of Islam should put

concerns of a rising Islam in Malaysia to rest.

The 54th Umno General Assembly was momentous for Abdullah. He was confirmed by a standing ovation as Dr Mahathir's successor. I felt a great sensation as he made me aware for the first time that he belongs to my generation of Umno children. He and I had served Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn and continue to serve Dr Mahathir in different capacities.

Dr Mahathir was superb during his opening and winding-up speeches. Unless you were at the PWTC's Dewan Merdeka, you could not possibly feel the power and imagery of his words.

Let me paraphrase both speeches: "Duty, serve, honour, country, race, religion, the present and future, win and win to guarantee the future which is being constructed." What Dr Mahathir said to the 2,018 delegates and thousands of observers - I was pleasantly surprised to note that there were hundreds of non-Malays - dictated what Malaysians ought to be what they could be and what they would be.

The Umno delegates to the assembly have made their choices clear. The crucial task of the newly-elected vice presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and the newly-constituted Supreme Council - is to create a constructive relationship with the Government, Dr Mahathir and Abdullah; to be their strong helping hands.

Datuk Shahrir Samad and Datuk Zahid Hamidi have returned to the Supreme Council. Their return was not unexpected. This is Umno's democracy at its best. In any event, Shahrir and Zahid have been given a second chance.

The losers tried hard but not hard enough. In the case of the Menteri Besar, they have only themselves to blame. Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Tan Sri Isa Samad should have agreed that only one of them should go into the fray and whoever was chosen would have won. Based on the results, Abu Hassan could have made it had he been the lone Menteri Besar contesting. There would have been a consolation prize for Datuk Panglima Osu Sukam, another state chief executive officer, would have also triumphed.

The election is over. The losers will, I hope, conduct themselves (the same for those who missed being nominated) in a way that heals the "wound", not deepens it. They should work as a team and reclaim lost ground and project the desired image of Melayu Baru - who do not forget their roots, hold fast to Islam, acquire new knowledge and skills to make themselves self-reliant, successful, a disciplined and united people, transparent and incorruptible, if that is possible.

Umno has not changed much, judging by the results of the election and the speeches made during the three-day general assembly. I hope Umno will quickly change between now and the 11th general elections which should prove to be a change for the better, to fit in with the other shifts in Bumiputera society outside Umno.

I remember reading General Douglas MacArthur's fond farewell speech to his beloved West Point in May 1962. He told the cadets that their academy's motto - "Duty, Honour, Country" would be their rallying points at all time: "To build courage when courage seems to fail; to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith; to create hope when hope becomes forlorn."

If Umno follows Dr Mahathir's and MacArthur's advice, Umno members will always hold the destiny of Malaysia in their hands. If the present generation of Umno leadership fails to be responsive to Dr Mahathir's and MacArthur's call, I pray the ghosts of millions of Umno members in white garb will rise from their graves thundering those words - duty, serve, race, religion, honour and country.

The 54th Umno General Assembly ended on a perfect note for most.

I myself have mixed emotions. I am happy but I am also in despair. I hope the "sinners" will repent. Unless they do, the stirring calls by Dr Mahathir will be lost and Umno will be in peril. It would be politically fatal to wilfully disregard Dr Mahathir's advice.

It is a paradox that among the many enlightened delegates there were also unconcerned representatives. In any event, the Umno General Assembly provides a good study and insight into the workings of the dominant Malay leadership - par excellence, warts and all.

Umno, either shape up or lose out.

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