

# Mahathir's exit marks the end of an era for Malaysia

SUN 20 DEC 2002

by Lawrence Bartlett

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Malaysia began a countdown to the end of an era this year when Asia's longest-serving elected leader, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, surprised the nation by announcing that he will step down in October next year after 22 years in power.

When Mahathir became prime minister on July 16, 1981, Ronald Reagan was a rookie president of the United States, the Cold War dominated global politics and Malaysia was a sleepy Southeast Asian backwater with a commodities-based economy.

He hands over to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at a time when the son of Reagan's successor holds

power in the United States, terrorism is seen as the main threat to world peace, and Malaysia is in the manufacturing mainstream.

Since 1981, the government has been something of a one-man show, with Mahathir's stamp of approval vital to everything, from the running of the economy to cleanliness in public toilets, and for some his departure was unimaginable.

This was demonstrated by the bizarre nature of his unexpected resignation speech at the Umno general assembly in June.

The 76-year-old premier was mobbed by protesting cabinet ministers before he could finish, burst into tears, hustled into a back room and took off the next day on a European holiday, leaving a stunned nation wondering what was going on.

Within days it was confirmed that he would quit, although not immediately as he had planned. He would stay on to host the summits here of the Non-Aligned Movement in February and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in October.

Once the initial shock had worn off and the nation had been assured there would be a smooth transition of power, the markets settled down and people began to take stock of Mahathir's anointed successor.

Abdullah, 62, is often called "Mr Nice Guy", but he faces a huge task in convincing the nation that he can step into Mahathir's shoes.

He has pledged to continue his mentor's policies, but there is no doubt the style will be different.

Mahathir is outspoken, well-known for his criticisms of the West

and prepared to chide the Malays for being lazy, while Abdullah is quieter, and a team player.

Analysts say Abdullah is unlikely to change any of Mahathir's business policies.

His foreign policy is likely to focus on enhancing political ties and trade with Southeast Asian nations, the United States and Japan, and it is possible he will be less critical of Australia.

Mahathir has regularly spurned Australia's attempts to be accepted as "Asian" in political forums, and recently chided Prime Minister John Howard for acting as "deputy sheriff" to the United States.

On human rights issues, for which Mahathir was regularly criticised, analysts see little chance of Abdullah doing away with the hated

Internal Security Act.

Abdullah, who is currently also home minister, has in the past year approved the detention of scores of alleged Muslim militants, many suspected of being members of Jemaah Islamiyah, accused of the Bali bomb blast in October.

Apart from the terrorist threat, Abdullah's major political challenge will come from the opposition PAS, a hardline Muslim group which wants to turn multicultural Malaysia into a theocratic Islamic state.

Abdullah has strong religious credentials, having majored in Islamic studies at Universiti Malaya, but this is unlikely to make much impression on the country's more militant Muslims as long as he upholds the secular nature of the constitution. - AFP