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Did you really think Dr Mahathir was joking?

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DID you think he was joking? Did you think Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad resigned last Saturday in a fit of pique or, conversely, that he had deliberately planned his dramatic resignation expressly to enjoy that outpouring of love and protest from his party members?

If you did, perhaps by now you have at last stopped judging him by yourself. If there's one thing Dr Mahathir has proved in his 56 years as a politician, the past 21 of them as president of Umno, chairman of the Barisan Nasional and Prime Minister of Malaysia, it's that he's not you or me.

You or I might have been that cynical and irresponsible, orchestrating the whole thing for our self-aggrandisement. You or I might actually have enjoyed that paroxysm of adoration from our devoted loyalists and fans. You or I might have wept crocodile tears while inwardly exulting, "they love me, they really love me!"

That's why you and I are not the PM.

So why did he do it the way he did? I don't know; I'm not him. Like you, I'm just another hapless goon out here trying to hold onto this papyrus raft tossing on the weltering turbulence of the pond into which Dr Mahathir chucked this giant boulder last weekend.

All we have to go on is everything he said prior to the last words we actually heard him say, which were: "No, no, I've made my decision, it's been long enough."

Since then, all we have known of Dr Mahathir's feelings has been what we've heard from Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. From the moment he took the stage at Dewan Merdeka, minutes after Dr Mahathir had left the hall, we have seen Pak Lah as never before. Did you think he was "weak"? Were you among those who injected the hint of a sneer into his being called "Mr Clean", implying he lacked even the gumption for corruption? If so, you were wrong.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is and always has been a man of conscience, integrity, honour and self-discipline. At the time of the Umno split in 1987, Pak Lah paid for his conscience with three-and-a-half years in the political wilderness. What saw him through that trial-by-oblivion was his self-discipline, which by then had been honed into tempered steel by the fiery first few years of the Mahathir Administration.

Were you among those who thought Abdullah was "weak" because of his acquiescence to the upward mobility of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, brought in from the boondocks of religion-political activism and promoted above Pak Lah's head?

Abdullah, born into Umno, had to watch the younger man's rocketing rise from the launchpad of his very own Penang. He didn't protest or sulk. He accepted Anwar, for the sake of the party.

When the party was declared illegal in early 1988, Pak Lah found it too much to be made to choose between the two presumptive inheritors of Umno's mantle, Dr Mahathir's "Umno Baru" and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's "Umno Malaysia". It was not until Umno had regrouped under Dr Mahathir, while Ku Li went for broke with Semangat 46, that Abdullah returned to the entity that was closest to the Umno he had known.

If you were around at the time to remember how he was accused of capitulation, you might also recall Abdullah's public declaration that his return was for the sake of the party, for his beloved Umno, and not the

party president. And still some called him "weak".

After Anwar was fired from Umno in September 1998, the party remained without a deputy president for four months. This was when Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying that his deputy had to be "exactly like me". Some were like him in some ways, said the party president, others in other ways, but no one fully fit the bill. Abdullah said nothing. Some called that "weak", too. I saw such strength as to put me in mind of a Rudyard Kipling rhyme remembered from childhood: "To stand and be still to the Birken-head drill is a damn tough bullet to chew."

Abdullah was duly appointed deputy president of Umno (and, by extension, Deputy Prime Minister) four months later, and confirmed unopposed in the post at Umno's electoral general assembly in May 2000. Commentators at the time (this one included) looked askance at Abdullah's protected status, especially when that assembly delivered resounding votes of return for vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Abdullah ignored our comments, and continued doing his job.

Within a month of that assembly, Dr Mahathir went on leave and Abdullah had his first stint as Acting Prime Minister. Knowing that two previous DPMs had sealed their fates by their actions in this particularly hot seat, we watched to see what Pak Lah would do.

He simply did his job, which was to act on behalf of the PM and not, as his predecessors had misjudged, to act as though he were the PM. Abdullah knew this in a way Tan Sri (then Datuk) Musa Hitam had not known in 1985, when as acting PM Musa recognised an Opposition victory in Sabah, nor Anwar Ibrahim in 1997, when he did a whole bunch of things that Dr Mahathir might not have done.

Even in this, some called Abdullah "weak". When he acted with pre-emptive force against the Reformasi rallies of 2000, they expressed surprise that such a "weak" man could act with such purpose and resolve.

Had such detractors been watching the live broadcast of last Saturday's events in the Merdeka Hall of the Putra World Trade Centre, they would have seen a Pak Lah they might scarcely have recognised. The way he took the stage within minutes of Dr Mahathir's departure to calm the traumatised delegates and declare the assembly's rejection of the president's resignation, with such commanding power in a voice usually so faint as to have reporters straining to hear him at Press conferences, was nothing short of exemplary.

The Captain may have left the bridge, but that did not mean there was no one at the helm.

Since a few minutes after six that now-historic evening of June 22, 2002, Umno and this nation have been held calm and steady by the hand, voice and stature of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

May he continue doing his job as he has done, being the man he is. As Churchill once said, essentially of himself: "Some chicken! Some neck!"

Selamat berkhidmat, Pak Lah, and good luck to you, sir.

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