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`Learn from leaders, think of lessons'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The younger generation and national leaders-in-waiting should learn from today's leaders and think critically of yesterday's lessons if they want to better serve the people, New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said today.

"Do not put yourselves at the centre of the universe. What you know is never enough, and what you don't know can harm you, and not only you but others too.

"Pay attention, live and learn, and try to be a decent human being doing a good job with life," he said.

Speaking to participants at a lecture on Perspectives from the Past, Paradigms for the Future organised by Promuda and hosted by Maybank, Abdullah said speaking about the legacies of Malaysia's four Prime Ministers namely Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was a tall order, given their achievements.

"Having served all four premierships, most closely with Tun Abdul Razak as political secretary and deputy minister, I would say that the essence of the job of Prime Minister is power. You must understand this power in order to assess and appreciate each premier's action."

Tunku Abdul Rahman was the father of Independence, he said, of a nation-state with a colonial economy and a social order segmented by race.

"It was a plural society, not in the sense with which we understand pluralism today. It was a pluralism whereby different sections of the community lived side by side, but separately within the same political unit, and where labour in the economic sphere was divided along racial lines," he said.

He said he observed that too often, there had been a failure to recognise the specifics of history in shaping the nation's political and economic development.

"Facts have become distorted and perceptions skewed. Our recent history explains the many economic, ideological and, some say, coercive elements in all the Prime Ministers' governance of the Malaysian nation."

He said Tunku Abdul Rahman's legacies included his leadership in the bloodless demand for and negotiation in the Merdeka settlement in 1957, and establishing the Alliance power-sharing framework which paved the way for a permanent partnership of understanding among ethnic groups as a way to manage racial tensions and promote social prosperity.

This later evolved into the Barisan Nasional formula, he said.

He said Tunku Abdul Rahman was perhaps the most charismatic and generous, personally and politically, to a fault.

Abdullah said the new Government under Tun Razak later weakened the link with Tunku which in time upset him, and on reflection Abdullah said Tunku might have been shabbily treated.

"But Dr Mahathir made amends, naming Putrajaya and Universiti Putra after him," Abdullah said.

He said assessing Tun Razak was easier in view of his (Abdullah's) close relationship with the late Prime Minister.

"My admiration and affection for him is obvious, and his for me is happily acknowledged. Contemporaries, commentators and writers have commented on our close bond," Abdullah said.

"I could never have found a better mentor to broaden my interests beyond those of the office and to mature my outlook and exercise influence

through his eminent position," Abdullah said.

He said Tun Razak, unlike Tunku Abdul Rahman, was shy, reticent, a very able man, a workaholic, brief in speech, practical and not given to rhetoric.

"Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir, I submit, are the best dictionaries of Malaysian politics," Abdullah said.

Abdullah said Tun Razak's legacies were numerous including a New Economic Policy where racial economic inequality and poverty were addressed through the Government's interventionist strategies.

He said Tun Razak brought Malay unity to its height, including bringing Pas into the BN.

"Its forced departure in 1978 was the seed of its present orientation and strength. Had Tun Razak lived, I think it would have stayed as a BN component," he said.

On Tun Hussein, Abdullah kept his comments to a minimal.

"I shall say little about Tun Hussein for good reason. Though well-intentioned he allowed himself to be manipulated by one of the most ambitious, ruthless, unpopular and duplicitous politicians in the annals of Umno. Tun Hussein wanted him as his deputy but the entire membership of the Umno supreme council rose against his choice," he said.

Abdullah said Tun Hussein was a good man throughout his life and that he (Abdullah) forgave him for the five years he was detained under the Internal Security Act "but I shall never forget it".

"History will record Tun Hussein as an accidental Prime Minister... He was the right man at the right time. In politics, that is imperative."

However, Abdullah said it would be wrong to say that he did not deserve office, adding that Tun Hussein contributed to the country by sticking close to his predecessor's policy.

"Still, Tun Hussein could not match Tun Razak, the icon of development and Dr Mahathir, the icon of modernisation. He lacked vision. He could not see the woods from the trees."

Speaking on Dr Mahathir, Abdullah said most of the participants at the lecture grew up in his years of leadership surrounded by the symbols of his legacies including the made-in-Malaysia car, Petronas Twin Towers, Menara Kuala Lumpur, KLIA, Multimedia Super Corridor and various other made-in-Malaysia milestones.

Referring to Dr Mahathir's many contributions and efforts over the years, Abdullah said, among others, from 1991 to 1996, politics and economics converged under the Vision 2020 where with its ultimate call for a Bangsa Malaysia, there was a shift from the earlier NEP-style or forms of ethnic balancing towards a post-ethnic nationalism.

"National self-esteem and collective self-confidence reached a peak in these years, a legacy that cannot be quantitatively measured but one which allowed each and every Malaysian to hold his or her head high wherever he or she went.

"He administers the entire Malaysian Government in a creative and audacious dispensation unique in Malaysian history and probably in the annals of democratic government."

Abdullah focused on one particular collective legacy of the last three Prime Ministers especially that of Dr Mahathir which was the construction of a stakeholder economy and stake-holder society.

"I believe this is relevant, not because you have benefited from it, but because it is an ongoing process and thus, remains a challenge to you," he said.