

Paying tribute to Dr M

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Thousands thank him for 22 years of effective leadership

KUALA LUMPUR: Thousands of Malaysians converged at Stadium Merdeka, the place that symbolised the country's attainment of nationhood, to pay tribute to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and to celebrate 50 years of power-sharing among the country's different races under Barisan Nasional.

The Prime Minister, who has been at the helm of the nation for the past 22 years, is also Barisan chief and president of Umno, the backbone of the 14-party coalition representing the country's various ethnic groups.

After leading the coalition to victory in five elections, Dr Mahathir will pass the baton to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, next month to continue the path he has charted over the past two decades.

The event, therefore, was also to welcome the Prime Minister-designate, a man that Dr Mahathir had repeatedly said was the most suitable to succeed him.

Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arrived to a red carpet welcome and a huge roar of approval from the 30,000-strong crowd at 3pm.

Dressed in Barisan's *dacing* (weighing scale) blue shirt, the VIP couple walked towards a purple Proton Cabriolet as Dr Mahathir's poem, *Perjuangan Mu Belum Selesai* (Your Struggle Has Not Finished), was played.

They were driven round the stadium as the crowd of young and old waved Barisan flags and shouted "Datuk Seri", "Dr Mahathir" and "Perdana Menteri Kita" (our Prime Minister) as the rendition of *Pahlawanku* (My Warrior) rang loud and clear.

Abdullah and Barisan secre-

tary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat, who were in a second car, later joined Dr Mahathir in raising the Barisan flag and singing the Barisan anthem.

This was followed by an inspection of a guard-of-honour mounted by 1,400 Barisan Wanita and Barisan Youth members and the oath-reading by Segambut Umno division chief Datuk Kamaruddin Ambok.

After the formalities were done, the crowd settled down to listen to speeches by Barisan component parties leaders starting with MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and followed by MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, Sarawak Chief Minister and Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu president Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, Abdullah and Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir told the crowd

that Abdullah was the man they now must support, and while he himself had received numerous accolades as a "national warrior," he saw it fit to heap praises on his successor.

The Prime Minister's speech ended with the release of blue and yellow balloons and the cutting of a yellow *pulut* (glutinous rice) cake by all leaders of the component parties.

Before leaving the stadium, Dr Mahathir launched a Barisan Youth gallery booth showcasing scenes of pre and post-Merdeka Malaysia.

The ceremony was a fitting tribute to a leader who took over the reins from three prime ministers before him to develop Malaysia into a world-class country.

And those at the stadium showed their gratitude by waiting in a seemingly endless line to shake his hands as he inched his way to his car.