

# Smooth for No. 1 - and No. 2

The handover of power will take place on the last day of October in an uncontroversial fashion but the question being asked now is who the new Prime Minister will appoint as his No. 2 and when he will do it, writes JOCEUNE TAN

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THE polished wood cabinet in the office of one Umno politician in Kuala Terengganu is decked with an array of framed photographs. The largest and most ornate frame contains a picture of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the Umno politician in a congenial pose.

Both men are looking at each other, Abdullah's left hand resting in a fatherly fashion on the shoulder of the Terengganu politician while the latter has both hands clasped about Abdullah's right hand.

In a smaller frame is a photograph of the politician seated beside Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak at a luncheon, their heads bent close in conversation.

No picture of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the other vice-president?

"Actually yes, a picture of us eating durians but too long ago. I'm trying hard to get a new photo," said the politician with a laugh.

A picture, as they say, speaks a thousand words and this politician's pictures are meant to tell visitors to his office that he is no run-of-the-mill Umno man.

There has been a rush among the more ambitious Umno politicians to put up pictures of the incoming Prime Minister in their place of work and even homes.

Of late, such photographic displays have also become a balancing act with regard to who will be the next Deputy Prime Minister. Most play it safe and display pictures of the prime candidates. The candidate who eventually makes it as the new No. 2 will no doubt have his photograph enlarged to a grander frame.

The handover of power has been scheduled to take place on Oct 3 1. Both Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah will proceed to the Istana after Friday prayers where the new Prime Minister will be sworn in before His Majesty.

Momentous events of state such as these tend to rely on custom and precedence.

The last handover was more than 22 years ago and the senior civil servants in charge of the organisational details had to reach deep into their files and memory to work out the procedure. Moreover, these senior officers were very junior when Tun Hussein Onn passed the political mantle to Dr Mahathir.

Hence, this handover is a little new to almost everyone, except perhaps Dr Mahathir.

At the exhibition entitled "A Thousand Faces of Dr Mahathir," there is a photograph of Dr Mahathir wearing a superbly-cut suit and *songkok*, just emerging from the palace gates after being sworn in as the fourth Malaysian Premier and besieged by eager reporters. He was unencumbered by aides or security personnel and looked confident and very handsome.

This time around, both the outgoing and incoming premiers will leave the palace together after the swearing-in. They will then proceed to the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya where there will be a joint press conference.

After that, the new Prime Minister intends to personally escort his predecessor home, right to the latter's doorstep because the ever-gallant Abdullah is assiduous about not allowing Dr Mahathir to leave all by himself.

It appears that this handover will set a precedent of its own because of the very different personalities involved.

But back to the question on so many lips.

Will the new Prime Minister announce his new deputy sooner or later? Will he announce it days, weeks or perhaps even months after he takes over?

The PM and DPM belong to all Malaysians but because convention dictates that they come from the top Umno leadership, the urgency about these two posts have always been greatest among the Umno faithful.

"Pak Lah should announce it soon, otherwise all those Umno people out there will not be able to think of anything else," said the political secretary to a minister.

"Please don't keep us in suspense," said an Umno division head from Perak.

The handful of Umno politicians who have dared ask Abdullah have been rebuffed by an enigmatic smile and a deft change of subject.

The most interesting aspect of the six-million-dollar question is that it has found a rare concurrence among supporters of the two key contenders, Najib and Muhyiddin. Both camps are keen on an early announcement.

Some of the reasons offered: the new PM will be swamped by work and duties. Everyone will be clamouring for a piece of the new man -to make courtesy calls on him, to have him at their events, to find out his plans.

Second, Abdullah will be leading a crucial general election and a deputy will help take some of the duties off his shoulders. Third, he would want the disappointed man and his supporters

to have sufficient time to recover before he calls for elections.

Besides, as a number of politicians pointed out, Abdullah would have had 16 months to think about it by the time he sinks into the top executive chair. They think he has already decided and if he still chooses to hold back the announcement, the reason would be pure political strategy - to ensure that whoever is picked would know his place as a deputy.

Dr Mahathir, on his part, did not rush to name any of his four deputies. In 1981, he waited several months and left it to the Umno general assembly to elect Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

When Musa quit in a huff in 1986, he waited five months before deputising Tun Ghafar Baba.

In 1993, although Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had won the Umno deputy president's post unopposed, Dr Mahathir waited four months before anointing Anwar as the DPM. Likewise, he took four months to name Abdullah as his successor after Anwar was sacked in 1998.

The waiting game is not always played out of necessity or indecision, but because it is part of the art of politics.

"The transition has gone so well, I don't see any problems whoever Pak Lah chooses," said Terengganu politician Wan Albakri Mohd Noor.

Or as Kelantan information head Alwi Che Ahmad said: "All of us, including the VPs, have pledged to support whoever Pak Lah picks. It's already settled, short of announcing the name."

The other vice-president, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, is philosophical about it: "The world will

not end if one is not picked. My stand then and now has always been to think of the party."

But Abdullah will be taking over a few days after the start of Ramadan. Many think he will be reluctant to make an announcement till after Hari Raya in late November.

"That way, both sides will have a good if somewhat suspenseful Raya," an Umno Youth politician said tongue-in-cheek.

Some are taking their cue from the Umno-linked newspapers. They have noted how the news coverage on Najib has intensified.

One Umno politician pointed out that during Lima in Langkawi, Najib's picture appeared five times in a single day in one daily. Those associated with Muhyiddin are peeved that the papers are behaving as though Najib is already the deputy.

But there seems to be the erroneous assumption that Abdullah is uncomfortable about Najib because of the latter's perceived strength and network in the party. Such talk began after Abdullah was picked over Najib in 1999 but a great deal of these assumptions is permeated by "the boys" on the ground.

What many seem less aware of is that Abdullah feels as comfortable with Najib as he does with Muhyiddin. The PM-to-be and Najib have been long-time colleagues in the Cabinet and enjoy a respectful relationship.

Aides of both Abdullah and Najib are aware of the harm "the boys" can do and have moved to quash it.

For about a year now, the top advisors of both men have met regularly, to get to know each other better, to discuss issues and share ideas. Such

meetings have meant greater understanding, trust and mutual respect on both sides.

Even the family members of both men - although not their spouses as yet - are keeping open the channels of communications.

Some are also curious whether Abdullah will have a minor Cabinet reshuffle after he takes over. The general consensus is that he will try to keep things as they are out of respect for the fact the current mandate was won by Dr Mahathir.

Some think Abdullah may even assume the portfolios of Home Ministry and Finance Minister I until the general election. The big reshuffle will come once Abdullah wins his own mandate.

Abdullah has not only been discreet, he has been quite inscrutable on these matters.

It is understood that his immediate priorities after the handover will be to engage the major stake-holders such as the Barisan Nasional component parties, the Umno supreme council, civil servants and other key groups, the purpose being to get everyone aboard the new administration.

Given his consensual style he will also use the meetings to get feedback and ideas.

But Abdullah's first evening as Prime Minister will be spent meaningfully and quietly with his family. There is unlikely to be any big celebration or jubilation because it is Ramadan.

The next day, he leaves for Kepala Batas to see his mother and to visit his father's grave.

After that, Abdullah will begin his duties as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia.