Abdullah steps out of shadow, first violin in own right

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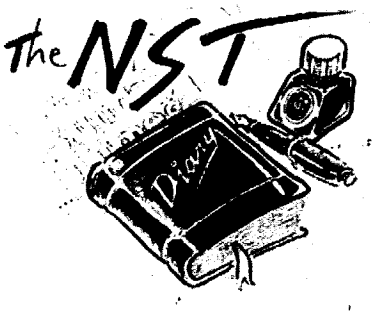

DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi becomes the nation's fifth PM next week and Datuk Seri Mohamad Najib is his second fiddle. The Diarist will be damned if it turns out otherwise.

This column was written in Pekan, where Tun Razak was born and represented in Parliament throughout his political career. A day after he returned from his constituency, the May 13, 1969 race riots broke out. He personally chose Abdullah to assist Abdul Rahman Hamidon (now Datuk), the chief civilian officer and senior civil servant at the National Operations Council, which Tun Razak chaired as director of operations with emergency powers. Its chief of staff was General Tan Sri (now Tun) Ibrahim Ismail.

With his own future settled deftly by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah must have explored the idea with Najib, who has not demurred; the Diarist is sure it's the right choice. The sooner this is announced the better all round.

Dr Mahathir has said what's needed to be stated. It's no good for the country to drape itself around his neck and, if the Diarist may add, to ignore him. From a long-term point of view, Abdullah knows what's good for himself and the nation. As they say, all's well that ends well.

Abdullah is the sort of person who plays down his own qualities, which the Diarist expects to bloom once he takes over the helm on Oct 31. Under Dr M, he is inevitably, and to a larger extent (compared with Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim), second fiddle. The Diarist is quite certain Abdullah is a first violin in his own right.

His friends and supporters will miss Dr M terribly. Not only is he a powerful leader, he is also "an obedient servant" of Malaysia.

He has a quiet personality, yet has the knack of getting Malaysians to follow him and his foes, both local and foreign, to scowl. Love him or hate him, he has done a tremendous job: he oiled all the wheels and made the machine work. He made one or two powerful enemies. The rest were largely twerps, who don't really matter.

The Diarist first met him in Alor Star in 1964. He introduced the scribe to the leading political lights of Kedah: Zahir Ismail (Tun), Syed Ahmad Shahabuddin (Tun), Azahari Taib (Tan Sri) and the late lawyer Ismi Ismail. From thence, they became good friends.

Dr M has had more direct influence on the betterment of Malaysians than his three predecessors — Tengku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn. It was because of consummate political skills that he survived all open and crypto challenges during his long tenure.

A former Cabinet member stopped the Diarist at a mall: "Tell him that his departure is a relief." Mrs Diarist was perplexed and taken aback. The Diarist explained.

Farewells for him are fairly low-key. This is perhaps to lessen the burden as much as the mark of the man: quite humble, despite his achievements.

Thus, no long speeches, no parades everywhere, no dinners at the Sultans' palaces (an exception was made for the

Sultan of Selangor) and no laying of foundation stones for edifices. Even so, it is a triumphant journey and farewell. As the people lavish praise and opponents censure him, they must not forget the one woman in his life — Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Her support, loyalty and love, and, more importantly, her sturdy uncowering confidence in him made all the difference.

Really, the Diarist is immune to remarks made about Dr M, but he has yet to hear a negative comment about Dr Siti Hasmah.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah, though in their late 70s, are the embodiment and the essence of what a modern Malay couple should be.

Dr Mahathir says he is no Sukarno. Yes and no. Dr M will continue to work in Putrajaya from an office in a private foundation building by a lake. Have no fear, the Diarist is confident he will never try to interfere directly with his successor's work.

If the Diarist were Abdullah or Najib, it would be wonderful to have a former mentor who may be interested and personally concerned with what they are doing nearby.

Hero or no, Dr M is a great PM. Like Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Dr M rebuilt Malaysia. Thaksin Shinawatra aspires to be the "Dr Mahathir" of Thailand and replace him as the "Voice of Asia".

□ The Diarist stands corrected. In last week's column, he mentioned Eva Peron of Argentina as one of the most memorable women presidents. It should have been Maria Estela Peron, the second wife of President Juan Peron. Although Maria Peron was president for two years, it was Eva (Juan Peron's first wife) who captured the imagination and love of Argentinians. Eva was immortalised in the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Evita*. Thank you, Hasnah, for pointing out the error and may you continue to enjoy reading this column.

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