

Handover to Pak Lah will be short and sweet

STAR 26 OCT 2003

ON Friday at exactly 3pm, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will end his 22-year leadership in a simple and short ceremony at Istana Negara. He will officially step down from his post and hand over the instruments of power to his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is to be sworn in before the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

It will be a no-frills affair at the palace, true to the style of Dr Mahathir who believes in simplicity. Cabinet members and officials have been told to be seated by 2.45pm. Tea will not be served once the function is over.

Then, the two will immediately head for Putrajaya where Dr Mahathir, in a symbolic gesture, will hand his seat to Abdullah at his office, located on the fifth floor of the Perdana Putra building.

This is where the press photographers will be waiting to record the smooth leadership transition and where Abdullah will assume his duties as the country's fifth premier.

Staff of the Prime Minister's Office will line up to extend their wishes to Dr Mahathir, who clocks out for the last time as prime minister.

From Saturday onwards, Dr Mahathir will be an ordinary Member of Parliament and, most probably, sit near former MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik at the Dewan Rakyat. Dr Ling stepped down from his party and government posts in May.

In the final lap of his leadership, Dr Mahathir was in Timor Leste on a two-day official visit where was accorded an official welcoming ceremony. Timor Leste gained independence last year after breaking away from Indonesia.

Its president, Xanana Gusmao, has said that of all the countries in Asia, the "Malaysian model" of national development and natural resource management was most suitable to adopt.

Dili - the capital of Timor Leste - has named one of its streets after Dr Mahathir. This is certainly the first for Dr Mahathir because he has forbidden any local authority to name a road, building or project after him.

Over the weekend he was in Papua New Guinea at the invitation of his counterpart, Sir Michael Thomas Somare. It was his third visit to Papua New Guinea, which has many Malaysian investors, particularly in logging.



On The Beat

By WONG CHUN WAI

On Wednesday, Dr Mahathir will chair his final Cabinet meeting. Most ministers, I understand, have decided not to submit any working papers so as not to bog down the meeting.

They want Dr Mahathir to use the occasion to express his feelings on how the respective ministers should handle the priorities he would want carried out. For the more senior ministers like Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, this extraordinary meeting will be an emotional affair.

The following day, Dr Mahathir will speak at the Dewan Rakyat as a premier for the last time. He will answer questions as well as table the mid-term review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

The same evening, the Umno president will chair a meeting of the party supreme council at the Putra World Trade Centre before breaking fast with senior Umno officials.

For a man who has been branded a dictator and a despot for the past weeks by the western media, he has certainly proved his willingness to give up his post without being kicked out of office in an election or a revolution.

Dr Mahathir has not held on to office for life, unlike many leaders in the Arab world who never even held elections. They are spared from any labels by a hostile press because they act as proxies for the United States.

The criticism against Dr Mahathir is a dampener as Malaysians prepare to bid him farewell but he is no stranger to controversy. He is a man who calls a spade a spade.

In many parts of the western world, the international media has humiliated him for his purported anti-Semitic remarks. Yet, those of us who read his speech in full or watched him on television during the opening of the Organisation of Islamic Conference knew that his speech was directed at Muslims, particularly the clerics and hardliners.

He lambasted Muslim countries for being backward and for shunning science and technology. He ridiculed fatalistic Muslims who

prepare for the next world but ignore tomorrow. He castigated "interpreters of Islam who taught that the acquisition of knowledge by Muslims meant only the study of Islamic theology."

If anyone who should be upset, it ought to be the majority of Muslims.

We remember he caused an uproar some years back, especially among some PAS leaders, when he allowed Israeli children to visit Malaysia to see for themselves what a modern, progressive Muslim nation can be.

Even at home, we know how he has continuously criticised the Malays for depending on the government and how he reminded non-bumiputras to accept the benefits of affirmative action, which may seem unfair but has brought overall political and economic stability to this country.

No one has been spared in his criticism, so there is no reason why the Arabs and Jews should be spared. No one is a sacred cow and certainly no one is untouchable as far as Dr Mahathir is concerned. Even the Malay Rulers found that out.

We know Dr Mahathir enough to understand that when he said Malaysia was already an Islamic state, the majority of non-Muslims were not alarmed because under his leadership, our country has been forward-looking and moderate.

We know that the Chinese and Indian communities do not have to worry about their cultural dances being banned, unlike PAS which lumps such performances under its anti-vice drive despite trying to convince us that they will be fair to the minority races.

Dr Mahathir has brought unprecedented growth to Malaysia over the past 22 years. He has single-handedly transformed a former British colony that depended on rubber and tin into one of Asia's most modern and wealthy countries.

We hold our heads high and proudly tell foreigners that we are Malaysians because of you, Dr Mahathir. You have been an inspiration to all of us. For this, we can only say thank you and wish you the very best in your future endeavours.

Terima kasih, Dr Mahathir.

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