

*"PAK Lah,"
the pundits say,
is no Dr M."
Sun 11/10/2*

How right they are. And how blind it would be not to see how appropriate that is, given the task in store for Malaysia's fifth prime minister. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself could not do what his successor will have to do – which is to lead Malaysia out of the Mahathir Era and on to the future he designed.

Because this duty has fallen to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia has scored another remarkable success in somehow having precisely the right man, in the right place, at the right time. Pak Lah is just the man for this season.

There can never be another Dr M. Indeed, the last thing Malaysia needs is another Dr M. Should this country ever again require a leader of such transformative resolve, we would have to acknowledge a failure even greater than that upon which Mahathir began his rise to top office, more than a generation ago.

We are so much more now than we were then. This is no longer some brawling new nation burning its fingers on fiery ideologies. We are into our fourth generation of Independence. There are now twice as many Malaysians, earning three times more. Education has burgeoned. Our economy is among the most resilient in the world. We reach now for "first-world status"; developed-economy strength. The agenda has changed. This has been Mahathir's triumph.

With the vast and varied constructions of the Mahathir Era complete, now comes the time for "O & M": operations and maintenance. The era of magisterial governance has achieved its objectives. Cue the managers.

The Abdullah Administration may prove supremely competent at this. We know Pak Lah so well; better, perhaps, than we knew Mahathir at the outset of his premiership. Abdullah's thoughtfulness and deliberation, the careful measure of his words, his preference for listening more than talking, his unfailing courtesy, all seem conducive to a more managerial style of leadership.

We also know him as a man of principle and discipline, though we may not yet know him through-and-through – the top office in this country, as in any other, will inevitably reveal the fullness of his character. Caution is therefore counselled against suggestions that the man is "weak" or "soft".

Abdullah is not a fighter the way Mahathir is. Dr M seemed to relish the one-on-one slugfest; he certainly retired undefeated. Pak Lah does not take things personally. His first stint as acting prime minister, in 2000, coincided with the first anniversary of the jailing of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, his predecessor as deputy PM.

Anwar's supporters will recall that their beloved colleague