

Turbulent journey to Putrajaya

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THE fifth prime minister of Malaysia, affectionately known as Pak Lah, spent more than 30 years in public service in a journey to Putrajaya that was at times rocky and uncertain.

Arguably the most important stint in Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's early career was not long after the May 13 riots. That was when the National Operations Council (NOC) was set up and the young 29-year-old civil servant was given the responsibility of being the principal assistant secretary, working together with Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and the top civil servants and uniformed personnel of that time.

It was, in fact, just before the riots that Abdullah met, for the first time, Umno's most celebrated dissident then, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah was secretary to a special committee headed by Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Samsuddin tasked with implementing the national language in the education system.

Mahathir who was chairman of the Higher Education Planning Council, was a member of the committee.

That was the beginning of a collaboration between the two men that continued to the highest positions of government.

During Abdullah's stint at the NOC, his father was already an established politician in Penang and the son, too, was being noticed as a future leader by the Tun Razak administration.

Tun Razak offered Abdullah the job of executive secretary of Umno which he declined because he found the salary was lower than what he was getting. When told of Abdullah's reason, Tun Razak said: "Abdullah, Umno has no money."

After the NOC was disbanded, the National Security Council secretariat was created where Abdullah served for a while until Tun Razak asked him to be director of youth at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

Tun Razak told him: "I want you to help Hamzah (Hamzah Abu Samah, then Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports). You must accept because it is a promotion for you."

Abdullah could not turn this offer down as the promotion meant he overtook two batches of officers in the civil service.

DEBATE ON THE MALAYS

This was a time of great introspection for the Malay community. The subject of the future of the Malays was debated widely.

Mahathir was then writing his seminal *Malay Dilemma* which was to shock the nation and the region.

In 1968, Abdullah was invited to join the Umno Youth committee on "Revolusi Mental", chaired by Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman. This committee was tasked with looking at how to change the mindset of the Malays to meet the new economic challenges of the day.

Abdullah became the coordinating secretary of the committee and one of the writers of the book *Revolusi Mental* which was widely read by Malay intellectuals, politicians and activists.

In 1978, after the incumbent MP for Kepala Batas, Datuk Sophe Ibrahim, decided to retire, and just shortly after his own father Ahmad Badawi passed away, the then secretary of the Kepala Batas Umno, Datuk Mohd Nor Ahmad, was asked to look for a young person to contest.

He had two candidates - Abdullah, who had just been promoted as deputy secretary-general of the Youth and Sports Ministry, and Tan Sri Murad Mohd Nor who was then Education Ministry director-general.

Both Abdullah and Murad rejected the offer, preferring to remain in their promising civil service careers.

This went on for a few weeks and Mohd Nor was on the verge of giving up when in his final meeting with Tan Sri Murad he was told to coax Abdullah again. Murad's argument was that Abdullah had grounding in politics because of the late Ahmad Badawi's involvement in Umno.

Murad said he did not have a base and felt he would do a disservice to politics because he was not adept at it and also a disservice to the civil service if he turned his back on what he was adept at.

"Dollah's grandfather is an ulama and his father is a political hero. You persuade Dollah and tell him what I told you," Murad told Mohd Nor.

Mohd Nor went to see Abdullah for the fourth time, and told him word-for-word what Murad had said. He also presented Abdullah an ultimatum - take it now or you might not get another chance.

Only then, he says, did Abdullah ask for two weeks to think about the offer. Finally, he agreed, but conditional upon Mohd Nor harnessing Kepala Batas Umno to work hard for victory.

Mohd Nor said he agreed and today, as Abdullah occupies the highest political post in the country, Mohd Nor says: "I

could not be happier. I have always believed in him and his capabilities."

Abdullah resigned from the civil service in June 1978 and contested against PAS candidate Musa Mohd Yatim, winning by a comfortable 5,029-vote margin.

FAST RISE IN SERVICE

Abdullah's ascent in politics was just as fast as his rise in the civil service. He became parliamentary secretary to the Federal Territory Ministry in 1978 and two years later, was made its deputy minister. In 1981, he was made a minister in the Prime Minister's Department by Mahathir, one of the fastest promotions through the ranks at that time.

As minister in the PM's Department, Abdullah was entrusted with formulating and implementing key Mahathir initiatives in the early years of Mahathir's prime ministership.

He oversaw the implementation of the Islamisation policy to meet the changing trends and to maintain Malaysia's moderate Islamic stance in the face of radicalism arising from the Iranian revolution. He handled the Look East Policy which was aimed at ensuring good work ethics in the Malaysian work force.

Abdullah was also instrumental in initiating some of Mahathir's most effective policy programmes including the "Leadership by Example" campaign, Malaysia Inc, the privatisation policy and the improvement of counter services at frontline government agencies.

Abdullah also introduced the first one-stop centre for the public to interface with the government. It was also at this time that Abdullah was the minister in charge of the Public Services Department, the National Institute for Public Administration (Intan), the Tabung Haji, the Islamic Affairs Department and the National Civics Bureau.

In recognition of Abdullah's ability and following his election as one of Umno's three vice-presidents, Mahathir appointed him education minister in 1984 - then a key stepping stone towards the top post of prime minister. In 1986, when Mahathir wanted to relinquish the post of defence minister, Abdullah was asked to replace him.

TURNS FOR WORSE

A year later, Abdullah's political fortunes began its turn for the worse. Tengku

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Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Hitam challenged Mahathir's leadership at the Umno polls and Abdullah teamed up with them. Razaleigh and Musa lost the contest for president and deputy president against Mahathir and his new deputy prime minister Abdul Ghafar Baba. Although Abdullah retained the vice-presidency by getting the second highest number of votes, the damage had been done.

Mahathir reshuffled the cabinet in May 1987 and removed those who did not support his policies. Abdullah was dropped.

"Forty-six months in the wilderness". A tough time rather than wilderness is how Abdullah describes the period he was out in the cold and often, jokingly equates it to the Japanese occupation of Malaya which also lasted 46 months.

Less than 10 months later, the High Court declared Umno an unlawful party following a suit taken against the party by supporters of those who had lost in the elections. After Umno's dissolution, Tengku Razaleigh set up an alternative called Semangat 46 and Mahathir and his supporters formed Umno Baru (new Umno).

Abdullah remained with Umno although he was not fully trusted by many who had been on

the opposing side during the 1987 elections.

Throughout this period, without a government portfolio or his own facilities, Abdullah operated from a small office in his sister-in-law's travel agency in Jalan Raja Laut.

FOCUS ON POLITICS

Around this time, Mahathir offered Abdullah a post as chairman of a large government-owned corporation. But Abdullah declined the offer, stating he wanted to concentrate on politics.

Mahathir then appointed Abdullah as a head of Umno delegation and key member of the National Economic Consultative Council which framed the National Development Policy to replace the New Economic Policy.

Abdullah devoted his energy to the non-paying jobs of Umno vice-president and the NECC and his perseverance paid off when in the triennial Umno party elections in 1990, he won again as vice-president. Less than a year later, on March 15, 1991, Mahathir brought him back into the cabinet as foreign minister, a post he held for nine years before becoming DPM.

But Abdullah's roller-coaster ride in Umno politics had not ended yet with his re-instatement to the cabinet. The worst was yet to come.

In 1993, two years into Abdullah's renewed career as a cabinet minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim decided to challenge then deputy

prime minister and Umno deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba. The Anwar juggernaut, backed by the media and some of the most influential young Umno leaders, was unstoppable.

Abdullah, sidelined by Anwar in Penang (Anwar became state Umno head replacing Abdullah after the 1987 battle), had forged a close relationship with Ghafar. When Anwar announced his intention to challenge Ghafar, Abdullah was among the first to state his support for Ghafar.

Abdullah lost the elections by a narrow margin, coming fourth in the contest for the three vice-president's posts. Although he still managed to get votes from his core supporters, he lost to block voting in a campaign rife with money politics. Vote buying was so rampant that delegates were heard saying, "there is no use going to Abdullah's house because you won't get any money".

Although some influential people at that time attempted to persuade Mahathir to remove Abdullah from the cabinet, Mahathir stood his ground and instead, appointed him to the Supreme Council.

SERVING THE PARTY

Abdullah continued to actively serve the party and was also required to travel widely as foreign minister to implement the government's

foreign policy objectives.

In 1996, Abdullah contested again and displayed that his core support had remained intact. He won the second highest votes for the vice-presidency.

When the economic crisis hit Malaysia in 1997, Anwar's supporters made a concerted attempt to dislodge Mahathir but failed and this time, Abdullah backed the prime minister.

On Sept 2, 1998, Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister. Four months later, on Jan 8, 1999, a Friday in the holy month of Ramadan, Abdullah was appointed deputy prime minister and home minister.

On June 22 last year, Mahathir dropped a bombshell by announcing his retirement from politics at the Umno general assembly. In the turmoil and emotional scenes that followed, Abdullah showed his calmness in a crisis situation when he tabled an emergency resolution asking the delegates to reject the resignation.

Following this, he led a delegation of top party leaders to see Mahathir and persuaded the former prime minister to remain.

Abdullah brings with him a wealth of experience in his 13 years in the civil service and 25 years in politics. He has not only served as a minister in all the major ministries, he also cut his teeth as a civil servant during the most testing time in Malaysia's modern history.