

A proud moment in our history

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DATUK SERI Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a picture of resoluteness as he rose from the gilded chair and walked slowly towards the regal figures of the King and Queen on the royal dais.

The Cabinet Ministers and top government figures who filled the plush throne room were hushed by the fact that history was in the making.

Abdullah took his oath of office, reading steadily in his slightly husky voice. Midway through, his voice broke but he recovered and continued calmly till the end.

The fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia had been sworn in.

As the new Prime Minister penned his signature on the document of oath, the diamond-shaped buttons on his silky black *baju Melayu* - a gift from his elderly mother in Kepala Batas - glinted softly in the light.

In the second row of seats, Abdullah's daughter Nori and her husband Khairy Jamaluddin were overwhelmed by the momentous occasion. They quietly wiped tears from their cheeks.

But Datin Paduka Seri Endon

Mahmood, clad in a beautiful beaded green *baju kurung*, kept her composure.

Moments later, the former first couple were conferred the titles of Tun by His Majesty. It was now Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Dr Siti

Hasmah Mohd Ali.

The new Tun who had held on so well to his emotions the past few weeks looked somewhat affected by the ceremony, particularly when the strains of national anthem filled the air.

He had around noon that day

confessed to reporters that although his face often looked calm, it did not mean that he did not feel his emotions welling from within.

The formal ceremony was over within half an hour.

It is possible that not a single

person in the throne room was left untouched by the significance of the moment and Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Shahrizat Jalil was openly crying.

"All of us felt emotional. But we also felt a lot of pride in the way the succession took place. There was a lot of dignity," said Johor Mentri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman.

Both the new and former prime ministers and their wives then proceeded to the Prime Minister's office followed by many of the VIPs.

But only the two men entered the spacious sitting room of the top office where, without further ado, Dr Mahathir handed over a thick blue government folder to Abdullah.

Downstairs in the foyer, the VIPs and journalists were mingling around, waiting for the two men to emerge.

Outside, in the plaza that opened out from the front entrance of the building, the crowd was growing by the minute. Government servants from other departments had made their way to the area.

Around 5pm, Prime Minister Abdullah ushered his predeces-

sor down to the foyer. Near the entrance, Dr Mahathir punched out for the last time.

The punching-out process itself was a reflection of how far this remarkable man has taken the country. He introduced the punch-in and punch-out system when he came into power. At that time, it was a simple mechanical equipment. Yesterday, he punched out on a biometric machine that read his thumbprint and flashed his image on the screen.

"I do feel it's the end of an era and the beginning of a new one," said Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.

Rais, who had waited patiently alongside the pressmen in the foyer, said he felt a deep sadness, but added: "It's hard to imagine that Dr Mahathir is gone but change must come and we must all give our support to make it work."

If Abdullah and Dr Mahathir were expecting a leisurely stroll to their official Proton Perdasas, they were in for a surprise. The crowd swarmed about them, cameras flashed non-stop and they had to virtually inch their way through the sea of people clamouring for a handshake and offering good wishes.

As the new and just retired prime ministers reached the top of the steps leading down to the plaza, the crowd below broke into applause and cheers.

Tears also flowed. A woman in a *tudung* was sobbing uncontrollably while others wiped away tears. Even the gentleman who read the *doa* to bless the two men lost his composure towards the end of his recitation.

But Dr Siti Hasmah looked like a great load had been lifted from her person. She looked radiant and lovely in a traditional outfit of soft pink.

Son Datuk Mokhzani said: "It was a good ambience. I feel relieved and happy for my father."

The final stretch from the steps to the car seemed to take ages. Some in the crowd held out large framed photographs of Dr Mahathir. A young man even tried to hand over a present.

As they reached the car, Dr Mahathir turned around gently to guide Dr Siti Hasmah into the vehicle. It took a few more minutes before he himself could climb in and even more minutes before the car could inch away amid more applause. Even then, people were running after the vehicle, trying to grab his outstretched hand.

Not far behind, the new prime minister followed in his own car, cheered on by the crowd.

The former first couple spent their final night at Seri Perdana where they broke fast with their children and grandchildren.

Abdullah and Endon also spent a quiet evening with their family and the prime minister's immediate staff of about 10 in their home.

History had been made in a way that all can be proud of.