

# Walking with Pak Lah

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For the local press, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is without doubt one of the most popular Malaysian politicians. He knows many of the journalists by name and is often responsive to the views of the press on issues affecting the nation. **WONG CHUN WAI**, who has the privilege of knowing Pak Lah, writes about the country's new Prime Minister.

**D**ATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi sat alone impassively in his room on the 11th floor of the Pemas building in Jalan Raja Laut.

With his reading glasses resting on his nose, his eyes were glued to the document on his desk.

Stacks of files rested on the table of the Umno politician who had lost his job as Defence Minister.

"I see that you are a brave man. People have stayed away from me while some prefer to use the emergency staircase," he said, breaking into a smile as he looked up.

Not wanting to be noticed entering Abdullah's office, some timid party members had used the lift which stopped at Bank Islam before using the staircase to walk up to his office.

Without the trappings and privileges of power, Abdullah had to use a room next to a travel agency belonging to his sister-in-law to meet party members and friends.

It was my first meeting with Abdullah, who had by then been in the cold for three years and nine months, a period he jokingly referred to as "my sabbatical leave."

My then news editor, Nizam Mohamed, had felt the necessity for me to get to know Abdullah better if I was serious in becoming a political writer.

Having just been transferred to Kuala Lumpur from Penang, my hometown, in 1990, Nizam thought that my first stop should be a top ranking Penang Umno politician.

That first meeting eventually opened the door for me to know the country's fifth Prime Minister closer and, at times, as a private person.

A simple man who prefers cobbling together a consensus to confronting his foes, the erudite politician is known for his accessibility to the grassroots.

Because of his unwillingness to be combative, he has been regarded as soft and overly cautious by some, but that is because they have not seen the other side of him – his unwavering stand on matters of

principles.

The press sometimes feel that he does not make good copy because he is not known for being rhetoric and sensational, preferring to make careful statements.

But it is hard to find fault with Abdullah. A pious person who leads a simple lifestyle, the Mr Clean image fits him well.

Pak Lah, as he is affectionately known, is also a forgiving man. He understood the predicament of certain Umno members who were reluctant to be seen with him when he was in the political wilderness.

"That is politics, young man. I understand them, it's okay," I remember clearly the MP for Kepala Batas telling me.

No stranger to adversities and the ups and downs of politics, Pak Lah was appointed Foreign Minister in 1991. Two years later, however, he lost his position as Umno vice-president in tough party polls.

The Wawasan team of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Haji Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin ousted incumbents Abdullah and Tan Sri Sanusi Junid.

As fate would have it, Pak Lah again experienced the bitter side of politics.

Driving to his single-storey colonial style home at Jalan Bellamy, behind Istana Negara, the dethroned politician found only family members and a handful of supporters and reporters waiting for him.

It has always been a tradition for Abdullah to host a dinner for Umno members and friends at the end of the general assembly but he returned to a near empty house that evening.

Inside his car, he asked his faithful aide, now Datuk Kamarulzaman Zainal, what he should do. The road ahead was filled with political uncertainties.

The heavy rain further dampened the mood among us. Soon, his garden, where the buffet dinner was placed, was flooded.

Worse, a blackout then hit the house and aides and friends had to look around for candles.

I remember telling an appreciative Abdullah, who was trying to look positive, that "light will return and you will also return."

Abdullah was subsequently appointed a supreme council member and also kept his job as Foreign Minister, which helped project his image further.

When Dr Mahathir was raising the country's image overseas, Abdullah was constantly by the Prime Minister's side.

Visiting over 40 countries on assignment with Abdullah helped me understand the man better, particularly in places that gave us the luxury of time and opportunity to talk to each other.

Away from the constituents and party members, Abdullah demonstrated his readiness to listen to the views of journalists who accompanied him.

Describing ourselves as outsiders, without the insight of the Umno inner circle, we seized the opportunities to convey our views on various national issues.

With an attentive ear, Abdullah would sometimes jot down notes as we talked. On one occasion, while attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Cyprus in 1993, Man, as Kamarulzaman is called, telephoned me at my hotel room to say the Foreign Minister was waiting for me at the pier.

"The boss wants you to join him out at sea. Quickly, dress up," he said, reminding me not to be late.

A yacht belonging to a famous Malaysian architect was waiting to take us on a cruise on the Mediterranean Sea. But as the cruise was my first on a yacht, even

the privileged company and fine seafood was unappealing to me as my head turned giddy because of seasickness.

He apologised that he did not have any *minyak angin* with him, joking that "*belum cakap politik, sudah pening kepala*" as he advised me to rest for the most part of the outing, waking me up from my sleep whenever food was served.

Three years later, Mr Clean bounced back, against all odds, in a historic comeback as Umno vice-president.

He polled the second highest number of votes at the expense of one of the incumbents, Muhyiddin, who was then Youth and Sports Minister.

Speaking to reporters after the results were announced, Abdullah credited his victory to his party boss, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"The president's speech may have paved the way for my return," he said, in reference to the passionate plea by Dr Mahathir, who had been in tears at the end of his presidential address.

Abdullah thanked Dr Mahathir and the delegates for "giving me a chance to make a comeback."

Two other incumbents – Najib and Muhammad – retained their seats for a second consecutive term. Najib came out tops with 1,483 votes against Abdullah's 1,053 votes while Muhammad polled 1,045 votes.

The hallways of the Putra World Trade Centre echoed to applause and thunderous cheers when Abdullah's victory was announced at 6.55pm before a packed Dewan Merdeka.

The rest, as they say, is history. He was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 1999, following the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from Umno and the government in 1998.

# Low-key style speaks volumes

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A few days before his appointment, as speculations were still rife over the choice of the new DPM, Man called up to say that Pak Lah wanted me to join him on "an important trip back to Penang."

It was a hint that Pak Lah had been offered the DPM post. Worried that my work commitments would not allow me to join him, I told Man that I "would see first."

But as events unfurled, it became clear that the newly appointed DPM would be going home to Kepala Batas, his first task in his new position.

On Jan 8, 1999, I joined the crowd at his Jalan Bellamy house after his announcement as DPM.

The man of the hour took calls from supporters as senior Umno politicians and Wisma Putra staff congratulated him.

The house was obviously too small for the man who would become Prime Minister one day.

"This is my unassuming house and it belongs to the government. I don't have a house of my own," he said.

Except for some close friends, many were unaware that he had to sell his double-storey house in affluent Bangsar when he was in the political wilderness.

At 7.30am, I waited for him at KL International Airport, about 20 minutes before the flight to Penang.

"I only had two hours' sleep last night. The guests refused to leave my house, they stayed until 3am," I remember him telling me.

He was too polite to turn away his guests, a weakness – and

strength – as some have taken advantage of his politeness sometimes.

At the airport, Abdullah said he told his wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood "she was the woman behind this."

Heads turned as we walked briskly to the departure hall to catch our flight to Penang, and passengers and airport workers stopped him to shake his hands.

When we arrived at Penang International Airport, a large crowd with banners was waiting for him. They included foes who had criticised but would now claim to be close friends of his. These included politicians who used to shun him but now followed him like a shadow whenever Pak Lah was in town.

After a short press conference with the local press, where he said he was happy to be home, he was

off to the gleaming Menara PSCI in Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah.

To the astonishment – and probably envy – of the local VIPs, Abdullah asked me to jump into his car with Man.

A convoy of cars escorted him through the heavy traffic without police outriders – a request by him, reminding Penang Umno leaders that he had yet to take the oath as DPM.

As our car approached Mesjid Negeri, Abdullah began telling Man and me about the importance of being humble and patient.

"You (referring to this writer) have my approval to tick off my officials if you detect any air of arrogance, please keep me informed," he said.

Over the years, I had less opportunities to meet him personally, given his punishing schedule, but when

we did, he would always pull me aside and ask me to tell him the mood "on the ground" and the performance of his staff.

As Man and I discussed the preparations for the swearing-in of the new Prime Minister, we reminded each other of what Abdullah had told us.

We agreed that the younger and newer staff, who may not be aware of what Abdullah had told us, should take heed of the advice as he takes up the new post. Their attitude and behaviour as aides of the Prime Minister will reflect on the office of the new Prime Minister.

What can we expect from Pak Lah as a Prime Minister? His moderate and low-key approach is what we need.

Malaysians can expect the rhetoric to be toned down, including harsh criticism against some west-

ern countries, but the country's foreign policy will remain, as Pak Lah has emphasised many times.

It will be his style to seek the views of non-governmental organisations and individuals and the trend is likely to be embedded as part of his policy-making mechanism.

The fight against corruption is expected to be a top priority for Abdullah. He has certainly given sufficient notice over the last few months.

Like Dr Mahathir, he is expected to speak up against money politics, a euphemism for corruption, in Umno.

He would also focus his energies on eliminating religious extremism, particularly against efforts by PAS to set up a theocratic regime.

Abdullah is also a very fair man. As Home Minister, he has overturned the unpopular decisions of some officials, reflecting his commitment to and understanding of multi-culturalism.

The revocation on the ban of the Iban-language Bible and the movie *Bruce Almighty* are just two recent examples.

His credentials as an Islamic scholar and his family history would certainly help Umno and the government.

Malaysians can expect Abdullah, who speaks Arabic, to use his knowledge of Islam to project the face of progressive and moderate Islam.

His credentials will also debunk the notion that only PAS can interpret the Quran. That will certainly make PAS uncomfortable.

His immediate task would be the formation of a new Cabinet and subsequently to lead the Barisan Nasional campaign in the next general election.

The outcome of the election, which is expected to be held early next year, will certainly have a deep impact on Abdullah's leadership.

A strong mandate for the Barisan in an expanded 219-seat Dewan Rakyat is important to reflect the mandate for Abdullah.