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Abdullah sworn in as PM (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Fatigued, victorious, yet graciously still, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was sworn in as Prime Minister of Malaysia today.

"I swear upon Allah, peace be upon Him, that I will carry out my responsibilities with honesty, with all my strength and ability, and with complete loyalty to Malaysia, and I will defend and safeguard the Constitution."

He took this oath before his peers and colleagues and the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, watched by millions on live television. He signed four copies of his acceptance letter with the silver-gold broad-nibbed Mont Blanc fountain pen that his late mother, Datuk Kailan Hassan, had given him just months before she passed away in February.

Immaculate in his ceremonial black baju Melayu and black gold songket, Abdullah wore on his shirt another memento from his mother - five square diamond-on-white-gold buttons.

A filial son, a moderate Islamic scholar, an inclusive, honest and humble man, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister, officially took on the responsibility to watch over Malaysia today.

His election pledge was to work hard if he was given a huge mandate.

That mandate he got, leading the Barisan Nasional to its best electoral victory in history, winning back Opposition-held Terengganu and coming within a whisker of regaining Kelantan.

In other States, the green tide of Pas was pushed back, their leaders falling like tenpins.

Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang was humbled and reduced to tears with the loss of Terengganu and his own defeat in the Marang parliamentary constituency.

The haughty secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa; the raucous Mohamed Sabu and Mahfuz Omar; the silver-tongued Datuk Hassan Ali and Ismail Kamus; the popular faith-healer Datuk Dr Haron Din; the bright new hopes of Pas like Syed Azman Syed Ahmad; all fell by the wayside, losing to mostly lesser-known Umno candidates.

Keadilan Nasional, which once could pretend to be the alternative to Umno, saw its defiant and unrestrained rabble-rousers Tian Chua and Saifuddin Nasution lose badly. Their only salvation, perhaps, was their president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's wafer-thin victory in Permatang Pauh.

As he promised, despite returning home in the early hours of the morning after his victory Press conference at the BN headquarters at the Putra World Trade Centre, Abdullah was up and about early, meeting his principal private secretary Datuk Thajuddeen Wahab, signing documents and looking at forming his new Cabinet and State Government line-ups.

Datuk Idris Jusoh will be the new Menteri Besar of Terengganu, as promised by Abdullah. And there will certainly be new faces in his first Cabinet. When he became Prime Minister in October last year, he inherited the Cabinet of his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and made minimal changes, only bringing in Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop as the second Finance Minister.

Now, with a mandate deservedly his own, and with a fresh field of faces to choose from, Abdullah has the choice of the best people to pursue the agenda of reform he has promised Malaysians.

In the days to come, Abdullah will also be looking at postmortems of both the BN and his own party, Umno, to look at the chinks in the armour and also weed out the saboteurs and malcontents who held the party to ransom and contributed to defeat from the jaws of victory in some seats.

Permatang Pauh is one case in point. Pasir Mas, where dissenter Datuk Ibrahim Ali spoiled the fight, giving victory to Pas, is another.

BN secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob summed up the general sentiment when he credited the coalition's huge victory as being "99.9 per cent due to Pak Lah".

The high voter turnout, which Hadi blames for Pas' disastrous showing, was also symbolic of Malaysia's pull towards Abdullah, who had appealed for voters to turn out in numbers and give him the mandate he needed.

His promise of cracking down on corruption, improving frontline departments and public delivery systems, a clean and more efficient administration, wealth-creating opportunities for the people and much more, secured him the support.

Abdullah was aided by a machinery boosted by enthusiastic Malaysians, young and old, who volunteered their services, and equally young people from Umno Youth and Puteri Umno, who spent the last two days of campaigning swooping down on fence-sitters to swing the vote.

Save for a handful of dissenters within his own party, there was strong support for Abdullah from the rank-and-file and the older members and leaders, such as former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir who traversed the country, soliciting support for him and the BN.

Despite foul-ups by the Election Commission, the election proceeded smoothly and the end result was beyond even the expectations of the most optimistic Umno and BN leaders.

Now, the real work begins for all who have been elected under Abdullah's auspices.