

16/02/2004

Top marks for the new boss

Zoe Phoon

IT HAS not been easy for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from day one. When he took over the driver's seat, it was the first change in leadership in 22 years. Analysts said Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's act was a tough one to follow.

Why? He was one of the longest serving and most dynamic leaders in the world, a respected statesman, and the founder of Modern Malaysia. Some even saw Abdullah's position as delicate, citing gaps in his otherwise impressive resume. People, especially foreign investors, wanted to know where he stood on fundamental policies, because Malaysia was a major trading nation with linkages in trade and investments with many countries.

Former premiers Tun Hussein Onn and Dr Mahathir, too, had their fair share of doubters, but history has shown that they have contributed meaningfully to nation building and economic growth. A seasoned bureaucrat with an illustrious career, Abdullah is expected to do likewise because he is well suited to maintain the political stability that has been key to Malaysia's phenomenal development.

With vast experience cultivated in portfolios in Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Education, he has expertise spanning all facets of national and international issues. As Home Minister, for instance, he has been firm and just in handling criminal and security matters and vocal in speaking against social ills and religious extremism.

Now, as the country's chief executive, he is well aware of all the important issues and matters concerning all policies. Describing himself as the 'number one public servant of the nation', he says he may institute policy adjustments if necessary. For priorities, the nation's interests come first, not personal glory. The fight against corruption has been the hallmark of his administration. He believes being incorruptible is the only way Malaysia can build its credibility, improve its image and become more attractive for trade and investments.

Abdullah, 64, was born in Penang. His grandfather Sheikh Abdullah Fahim was an ulama and Quran teacher. His father, Datuk Ahmad Badawi, was deputy head of Umno Youth. Abdullah attended a religious secondary school and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Islamic Studies from Universiti Malaya. His family background and education has had an impact on him. He entered politics upon his father's death, being elected to parliament in 1978 as member for Kepala Batas in Penang. As Deputy Prime Minister, his religious values showed in his decisions, views and approach. He liked to build on consensus.

In the early 1980s when he was Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, he was responsible for the civil service. The-then new premier Dr Mahathir had introduced the Look East Policy, inculcation of Islamic values in the civil service, work improvement teams, quality control, nametags and punch cards.

His colleagues in the civil service said Abdullah had a lot of ideas on how to improve, modernise and make things more efficient. Institute Tadbiran Awam Negara (Intan), a premier training centre for Malaysian civil servants, and the Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (Mampu) in the Prime Minister's Department, became vehicles to facilitate implementation of these policies. One-stop bill payment is one of his ideas. He was also responsible for initiating and implementing the leadership by example programme.

To Malaysians, his 'work with me and not for me' paradigm signifies a more consultative government. He has a consultative nature. As a student leader in the 1960s, he introduced tuition as a core project because he believed coaching and consulting practices among students would help them improve academically. When he became Director-General of the Youth and Sports Ministry in the early 1970s, he initiated the Youth Consultative Council as a forum to exercise decision-making. And as Deputy Prime Minister, he introduced the Students Consultative Council.

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