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Undisputed No. 1 leader

By Kalimullah Hassan  
IT'S done now.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been given the final mandate, consolidating his position as the country's undisputed No. 1 leader.

After Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad retired on Oct 31 and passed the baton to Abdullah, the first step was to get endorsement from the 14-member Barisan Nasional coalition as chairman of the BN. This Abdullah did.

The second was to secure a mandate from the people. This too he did.

In the March general election, the Abdullah-led BN secured its best-ever electoral victory, winning more than 90 per cent of the seats in Parliament, regaining control of Opposition-held Terengganu handsomely, and coming within a whisker of winning the only other Opposition-controlled State, Kelantan.

Yet, there were still the doubting Dauds who questioned whether the Prime Minister had Umno's support.

BN endorsement? Fine, they said. General election victory? Sure, fine. But Umno is the most important. Abdullah still needs Umno's endorsement.

Both Abdullah and his chosen deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak resoundingly received Umno's endorsement yesterday.

The only challenge, if it can even be called that, came from Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. The Kelantan prince so far has only one nomination out of 191. That too from his own division, which he has led for decades.

With just a handful of divisions yet to hold their meetings, it is unlikely that Razaleigh will get any more nominations to make his score more respectable.

For Tengku Razaleigh, 67, one of the main players in Umno politics in the 1980s, the road to top level politics has probably come to a dead end.

In many ways, it is a changing of the guard. Razaleigh's contemporaries and peers, who became powerhouses in the 1970s under the visionary guidance of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, have all retired.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba and many other warlords and chieftains of the 1980s have passed on, either retired or thrust into the political wilderness.

The re-generation process is firmly in place, and the future belongs to the Najibs and Hishammuddins of the world, and the many Husnis, Azalinas, Khaleds, Norzas and Khairys behind them.

For Abdullah, it is an endorsement of all the measures and policy reforms he has implemented since he became Prime Minister.

At the same time, Abdullah has the opportunity to institute changes with the full force of his position because he has all the mandates now.

And Abdullah also knows that for the next three years, Umno members will be watching to see whether he delivers.

They have given him their confidence. He, in turn, has to repay their trust. Or face their wrath.

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