

01/11/2003

A natural successor

Saiful Azhar Abdullah

IN an interview with the New Sunday Times in June 2000, 18 months after his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was asked if he saw himself succeeding Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He replied: "God willing, I'll be there. Who doesn't want to be promoted? I always believe that in life, whether you succeed or not, you have to work hard to go up.

"All politicians, up to a certain level, have aspirations. If they say they don't, they are lying. But not everyone is going to be there at the top.

"Datuk Onn (Jaafar) was such a popular leader who led the Malays before independence ... but he left Umno. Then Tengku (Abdul Rahman) became the leader although he was no orator like Datuk Onn. He spoke the Kedah dialect and people used to make fun of it.

"Dr Mahathir was expelled from Umno but he came back - today he is PM. (Tan Sri) Musa (Hitam) too, but he came back as DPM. (Tun) Hussein Onn was in Parti Negara with his father but he came back and became Prime Minister.

"Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah led Kelantan to fantastic election results and in 1987, he was out of everything.

"(Tun) Ghafar (Baba) was already running in his last round when (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) came in. He was already VP (vice president) when Anwar was still running around in Pampers (diapers). And when Anwar became DPM, everyone said: This must be the man. Then Pak Lah came ... that's a surprise for you."

It's no longer a surprise. Yesterday he became the fifth Malaysian Prime Minister, assuming the highest post in the Government - that which Dr Mahathir's three other deputies had failed to secure.

Harold Wilson, the former British Prime Minister, once said in the mid-70s: "A week is a long time in politics."

From the day Dr Mahathir shocked Umno delegates at the party's General Assembly in June 2002 by announcing his retirement, detractors couldn't halt the rumour mill that Abdullah might end up with the same fate as Dr Mahathir's other deputies because the latter might change his mind and remain in power after October.

Eleven months, they said, was a long time. Now Abdullah's tenacity and loyalty to Dr Mahathir has been rewarded, and handsomely too, after 30 years of weathering the trials of politics.

The reason is simple. A ship can't afford to have more than one captain. Not even "second first man", said Musa in an interview with TV3 aired on Oct 19.

Said Abdullah of his role as the DPM shortly after his appointment: "I see myself as no more than the deputy. I don't delegate myself the alternate leader. A deputy is a deputy. So many lessons to be learnt ... how Tan Sri Musa conducted himself, and Ghafar and how Anwar conducted himself.

"I thought Anwar was already putting himself as the other leader, the second general in the army and I was strongly admonished and criticised by his close friends for saying that the army has only one general."

Abdullah comes from a highly respected background. His grandfather, Abdullah Fahim, whom he relied upon as a guide throughout his life, was a well-known ulama, and also the first ulama to leave the Ulamak Association

for Umno.

His father, Datuk Ahmad Badawi, was Umno's first deputy Youth leader who also ran the religious school established by his grandfather. Both his father and grandfather were born and schooled in Mecca.

Abdullah had his schooling at Permatang Bertam Malay School, Daeratul Maarif Wataniah Religious Secondary School (afternoon religious classes), Sekolah Tinggi Bukit Mertajam and Methodist Boys School before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Islamic Studies from Universiti of Malaya in 1964.

After serving as an assistant secretary in the Public Service Department, he was appointed principal assistant secretary in the National Security Council in 1969.

In 1971, he was made director of the Culture, Youth and Sports Ministry and the Ministry's secretary-general in 1974.

His political career began in the same year when he resigned from government service to enter politics.

His political career received a tremendous boost when he won the Kepala Batas parliamentary seat in 1978. He was subsequently appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Federal Territory Ministry before being appointed Deputy Federal Territory Minister on Sept 15, 1980.

After retaining his seat in the 1982 general election, Abdullah was appointed Minister in the Prime Minister's Department until 1984 when he was made Education Minister in a Cabinet reshuffle.

He became Defence Minister in February 1986 and Foreign Minister in 1991 after being dropped from the Cabinet in 1987 when he backed Tengku Razaleigh, who had challenged Dr Mahathir in the Umno election.

After being elected to the Umno Supreme Council in 1981, he was elected vice president in 1984, 1987, 1990 and 1996. He lost the post in 1993 but was appointed to the Supreme Council.

Abdullah assumed the responsibilities of Umno deputy president in February 1999, a few months after Anwar was expelled from the party. On May 11, 2000, he won the post of deputy president uncontested.

His defeat as party vice-president in 1993 was viewed by his detractors as the beginning of the end. He remained as Foreign Minister but it was not the best post for an ambitious politician.

It is not a Ministry where patronage could be granted in return for political support.

Obviously it was a handicap as it deprived him of precious time and opportunity to meet party members at the grassroots level.

He had to spend half the year out of the country on official business, which meant he spent more time away from local politics.

But Abdullah was undeterred. His tenure as Foreign Minister saw several sticky issues including the Gulf War, the East Asia Economic Caucus, the overlapping claims on Spratly Islands, Asean and Bosnia Herzegovina, that required firm and diplomatic handling.

He settled well in his job at Wisma Putra and established himself as one of the most respected of Foreign Ministers.

His image won the hearts and minds of the people. He didn't complain after his defeat in 1993 although it was no secret that the elections were influenced by money politics.

He still went on doing everything as usual.

"After my defeat, my friends still came to see me. I still had visitors, both at home and in the office. My friends still called me to join them for golf," said Abdullah in an interview.

Abdullah has always maintained that among his priorities is party unity.

He cemented Dr Mahathir's confidence in him as his successor. Immediately after coming back from a two-month leave in May this year, Dr

Mahathir declared Abdullah was ready for the job.

Now that Abdullah's era has begun, many wonder what his policies will be and whether he will be tougher or otherwise compared with Dr Mahathir. But it will be an injustice to compare him with his predecessor.

Some say his style of administration will likely be consultative and approachable, but firm in moral and political courage.

A keen observer noted: "He has a more consultative style, a willingness and, some say, too generous a patience in listening to others' views.

"It will, however, be a serious error to underestimate Abdullah's ability to say `no' to those with whom he disagrees.

"Some people are already finding that out. His strength is that he is, unlike some leaders now strutting the political stage, uncorrupted by cynicism and the divisiveness of personality-based politics.

"More importantly, he has an idealistic commitment to create a new sense of national interest and purpose.

"Abdullah does not lack moral or political courage and is a leader who has been tested many times, including being a `non-person' at one time.

"He has never lost his moderate ways and impeccable character. He is a religious man in a real world."

Abdullah has been asked numerous times about his approach and what he intends to do after taking over from Dr Mahathir.

Some say it was in his speech titled Managing Success which he delivered when addressing the joint opening of Umno Youth, Wanita and Puteri assemblies in June.

The clearest message emerged at a forum in Japan in July when he said: "Let me make it very clear that I intend to continue the domestic, economic, political, social, cultural and foreign policies that have been well established by my Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and that have been deeply institutionalised by Malaysia.

"I will continue the economic policies and comprehensive economic relations that are already an institutionalised part of my country's standard operating procedure."

Befitting his image as Mr Nice and Clean, Abdullah also demonstrated that he would take a tough stance against corruption.

In June, he instructed the civil servants to act "convincingly and quickly" against the private use of public money, the cover-up of wrongdoings or the failure to follow rules and procedures.

He wanted those who betrayed public trust to be severely punished. He urged them to make their delivery systems transparent and user-friendly, cut red tape and add checks and balances.

And on July 6, when he was Acting Prime Minister, Abdullah expounded that he is determined to arrest the malaise among Malaysians manifested in poor execution, inept management, shoddy maintenance and appalling customer service.

He again called on Malaysians to fight corruption and abuse of trust besides respecting property and abandoning the notion that the Government owed the people a living to achieve the Vision 2020 concept.

All these are pointing towards one thing. Abdullah will strive to remain "Mr Clean" and trustworthy. He will be tough but fair.