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Abdullah will rise to nation's challenges

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DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has taken over as Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister following the retirement of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. As Malaysians of all races deeply miss a dedicated and visionary leader in the person of Dr Mahathir, so have they welcomed an equally capable Pak Lah to his new position which promises to be very challenging.

After 22 years, Dr Mahathir has left an indelible mark. His many contributions will be appreciated by friends and foes alike. As a true patriot and visionary, Dr Mahathir's achievements are innumerable.

But what stands out most from my point of view is his commitment to modernisation, ICT development, changing the mindset of Malaysians and his indefatigable efforts to put Malaysia on the world map.

Another remarkable trait of Dr Mahathir is his ability to articulate his thoughts in a frank and forthright manner, particularly on issues such as the Palestinian struggle for justice and freedom and his vehement opposition to war as a solution to conflicts.

He was equally committed to racial and religious harmony in a multi-racial country like ours which he proudly claimed to be his most significant achievement.

If there is one single characteristic worthy of emulation by all Malaysians, it is Dr Mahathir's limitless energy and capacity for hard work that enabled him to answer the call to duty.

Pak Lah inherits a modern and progressive Malaysia, but he is also confronted with tough political and economic challenges.

Given his political acumen and experience coupled with his diplomatic skills, Pak Lah will certainly weather many a storm and steer the nation towards greater progress.

He is not expected to make radical changes to existing policies, domestic or international.

During an official visit to Brunei in July this year he was quoted as having said: "When I take over as Prime Minister there will not be any regime change or radical changes in Malaysia's policies. It will not be a change of government. It is only a change in the individual."

He has said before that he will not change policies that have benefited the country. If there are any situations that require improvement he will make adjustments.

The challenges include the looming general election, attracting foreign investment and bolstering our economic competitiveness.

Economically and politically, he has a relatively firm foundation to build on as the economy is healthier and improving, and political stability is still intact.

As a friend of Pak Lah, I suggest in all earnestness that he strengthens public confidence in the Government. One primary issue is strengthening integration, racial and religious harmony, boosting efforts to forge unity and help realise a strong and united nation and a Bangsa Malaysia.

With his religious background, Pak Lah should also strive for interreligious dialogue and set up an Inter-Religious Council.

National security and public safety, particularly crime prevention, should be another priority area. In this regard, the morale and capacity of the police force need to be beefed up.

Another very challenging task awaiting Pak Lah is to change the Third

World mentality of Malaysians despite Malaysia having First World infrastructure.

As he stated in March this year, Pak Lah has to address and arrest the malaise manifested in shoddy maintenance, poor customer service, lack of civic consciousness and respect for public properties.

Malaysians of all races wish Pak Lah well and every success so that he can bring Malaysia to greater heights of achievement.